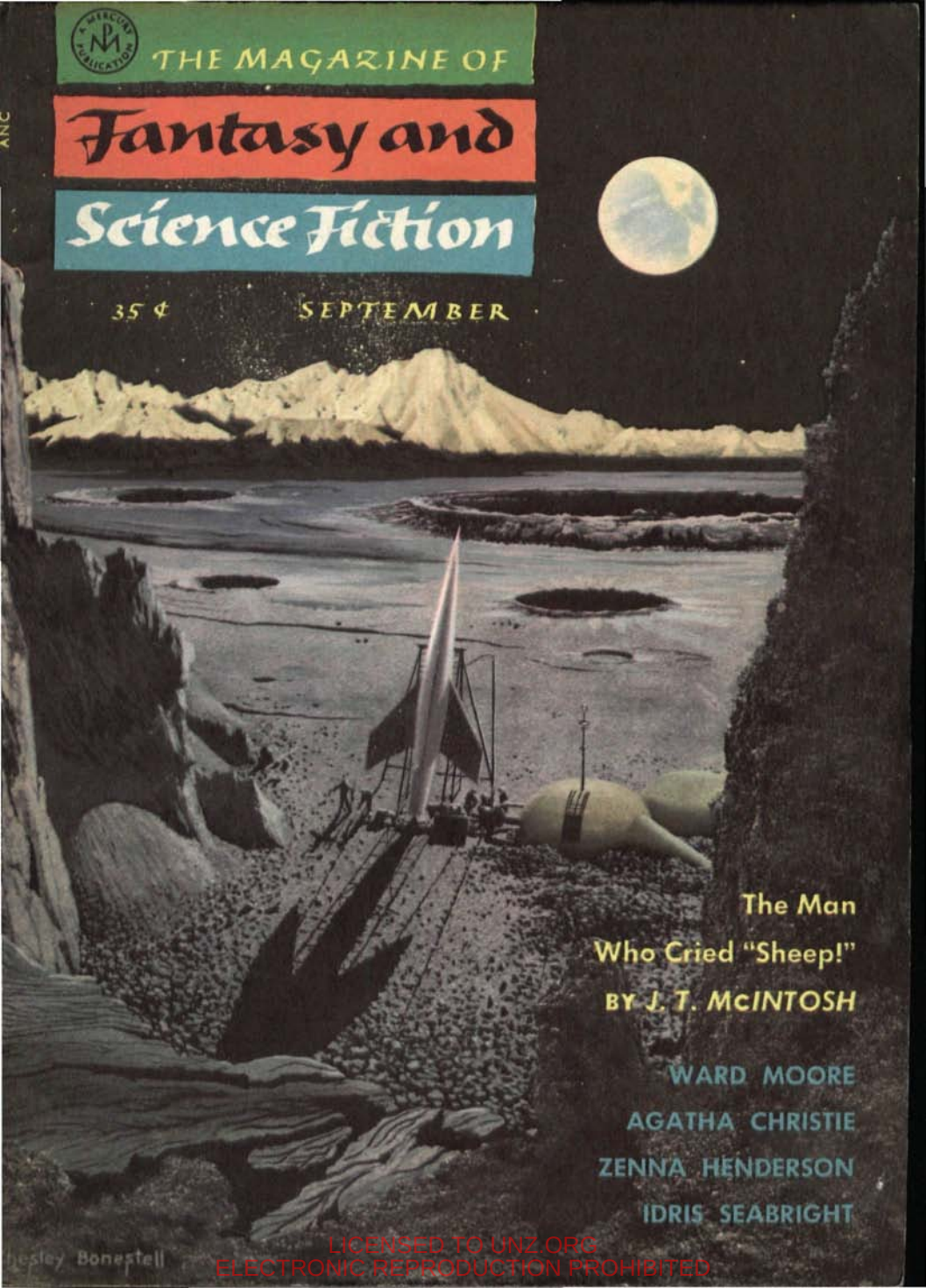

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THE MAGAZINE OF

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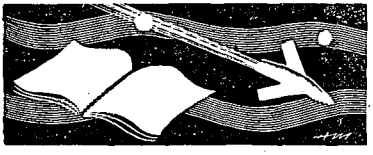

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The Man Who Cried "Sheep!"

by J. T. MCINTOSH

THE APPLE HONEY WAS DECELERATing for the landing on Renn, and everyone was running about trying to lay eggs.

Somehow spaceliners never inherited the smoothness and efficiency of ocean liner operations. Make a sea journey on any of the older, more leisured worlds and the whole thing goes like velvet. Travel from planet to planet, or worse still, system to system, and the trip goes like a run in an ancient groundcar with square wheels and no springs.

I stood about and got in everybody's way, by the simple expedient of existing. When people are rushed and flurried the thing they really want more than anything else is a last straw to break their backs, and someone standing around coolly, inoffensively, not taking part in the general flurry and scurry, is generally enough.

"There's a radiogram for you, Mr. Lees," a stewardess panted, and ran off in three different directions.

I waited for a while with the optimistic idea that someone would bring me the radiogram. But everybody was still trying to do half a dozen jobs at once, and bringing me my radiogram was obviously one of the jobs that several people had decided could wait.

I went and collected it, not without some difficulty. It wasn't clear (it never is) whether it was the passengers who had infected the crew with their own last-minute jitters, or vice versa. At any rate, I could feel with some complacency that I was the

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only sane person in sight. *I* wasn't dashing about madly, was I?

I read the radiogram, worked out what it meant, under the two codes — and then began dashing about madly like everyone else on the ship.

Imagine it. Nine weeks of doing nothing in particular, reading thrillers, sleeping, eating, vegetating, just passing the time. Nine weeks of having as little as possible to do with my fellow passengers, because the less anyone remembered about me the better. Nine weeks of suspended animation, as near as I could manage without chemical assistance.

And then, just before landing, much too late, a peremptory order to find a needle in the haystack I'd been refusing even to look at for nine weeks.

The radiogram told me, in codes VL and DE, that according to information received I had almost certainly been identified in Verna itself as a Vernan agent and probably accompanied from Verna to Renn by a Kolperian operative. That while I myself must be known to this operative, it was strongly suspected that he didn't know my mission, and if I could find and silence him on the ship I might be able to do my job without Kolperian intervention.

Consider the beautiful fiendishness of instructions like that — typical of all governments to all secret agents, I may say. I was given a warning and made responsible for it myself. I wasn't *instructed* to do anything which might turn out right or wrong. I was merely given information which might be right or wrong, and left to make my own juice in which to stew.

If I could find and silence a Kolperian agent who might or might not be on the ship . . . that at least implied that I *should* find and silence him, which was something. I wasn't entirely without instructions.

I was instructed to commit a murder.

The fact that the victim knew who I was and I didn't know who he was clearly didn't worry my superiors.

I decided, not for the first time, that it had been a rather serious mistake ever to have been born.

However, I didn't have time for such reflections. I had to find a spy.

How do you go about finding a spy who knows you're a spy and must have satisfied himself that you don't know he is?

The stewardess, the same stewardess, blonde and breathless, paused in her career past me and said in a tone which had a just discernible snap in it, "There's a *radiogram* for you, Mr. Lees," and sprinted down another corridor to do some urgent business.

"Thank you," I told the space where she had been, "I've got it."

I think at this point a warning is due. I don't go around hard-eyed

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and tight-lipped just because I happen to be a spy. That's the last thing any spy should do. I act as much as possible like an ordinary, sensible youngish fellow with a sense of humor, and think of myself that way.

I'm also a psychostatistician, and that's real. I'm not a spy pretending to be a psychostatistician, I'm a psychostatistician pretending to be a spy.

Quite often, as in this case, the job I do may affect the future of billions of people. That's still no reason to go around grim-faced, hard-eyed and tight-lipped. The people who can handle responsibility best aren't the people who are most aware of it.

But it is a reason for an ordinary, sensible, youngish fellow with a sense of humor, like me, to do unexpected, out-of-character things sometimes.

Call that an excuse if you like.

People shouldn't feel their jobs are tremendously important. That's how fanatics are born, men and women who murder and torture in the Cause.

But suppose you *know* your job is tremendously important?

I hurried to my cabin and locked the door behind me. My trunks hadn't been taken away yet. From one of them I removed the lock, and the trunk was still locked. The thing in my hand was a tiny radio transmitter masquerading as a lock. There was virtually no risk of customs officers or anyone else finding it unless they knew it must be there.

Unlocking the cabin door again, I went in search of greater privacy and something I could use as an aerial. The breathless blonde found me again and told me with more than a touch of asperity this time that there was a radiogram for me.

The general confusion now became useful. Everybody was too busy to notice what I was doing, or to care if they did notice. I made my way to the dining rooms, knowing they would be officially closed but not locked.

I went through the main dining room and glanced into the kitchens. Someone was in the first I looked into, making sure everything was secure. The second kitchen was empty.

I took the lock-radio from my pocket and looked about irresolutely. Seeing a small door on the other side of the kitchen, behind the fixed steel tables, I went over and investigated that. It led to the refrigerators.

I decided against the refrigerators and made my way through to the storerooms instead. Certainly no one would be loading the ship with fresh stores for hours, perhaps days. In the storerooms I should be quite safe from interruption.

I wedged myself out of sight so that even if anyone did glance in there would be nothing for him to see — except what he expected to see, which came to the same thing.

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Squatting down, I pressed a suction pad at the back of the tiny radio to the steel deck. The ship itself would have to serve as an aerial.

I switched on and started tapping out a call-sign with my left hand.

Without pausing, I fired through my pocket and the empty packing case next to me. A man pitched forward from behind it, but there was a gun in his hand and even as he fell he meant to use it and was going to use it. I saw it come up.

I shot again. It was a panic shot. Fear didn't make my aim wild, but it made me shoot to kill. The man crumpled with a small hole in his temple.

I stood up, trembling. I hadn't meant to kill the Kolperian; however, still less had I meant him to kill me. I had looked into a gun and known that unless I could get my shot in first, I was going to die.

I was no hero. I was scared stiff. My knees buckled and I had to grab a packing case to prevent myself pitching on top of the dead man.

I was very, very sorry to have killed a man. But I was very glad indeed to have killed him instead of letting him kill me.

As for finding him — it was very simple, really, the master mind remarked modestly.

If there were a Kolperian agent watching me, he would certainly be on his toes the last two hours before landing. He would have heard about the radiogram — the blonde stewardess seemed to be trying to make sure that everyone on the ship knew about it. But he couldn't know its contents, and even if he had managed to see it, it was in code.

Naturally when I started dashing about he had to know why. Risk or no risk, he had to follow me wherever I went and find out what was going on. He couldn't afford to be clever and decide that what I was doing was just an act.

He had to come out from cover.

I hadn't seen him when I was in the dining room or the kitchens. I hadn't even been quite sure when I fired the first shot, though I thought I'd heard and seen a few tiny, significant things.

All I knew was that if anyone was on my tail I must have maneuvered him behind that packing case.

Anyway, now that he was lying on the steel floor of the storeroom the first thing was to find out whether killing him had accomplished anything.

I went through his pockets, and not merely his pockets. He had an identification card in the lining of an inside pocket, I was interested to discover. Most secret services have long since given up all kinds of identification cards as too risky.

More interesting was a coded dispatch which suggested all sorts of things, though I couldn't read a word.

Codes have at least two enormous disadvantages, even if they're virtually unbreakable, as I assumed this

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one was. One is that anything in code is usually obviously in code, and obviously important. The other is that codes usually have to be worked out in some complexity, which means that instead of walking into any post office and writing out his message off the cuff, anyone using codes has to have the message worked out in advance, ready for a convenient opportunity to send it.

I put the piece of paper with the coded message in my pocket. I left the Kolperian — Fenner was his name — lying where he was. When he didn't disembark voluntarily, there would be a search for him which would continue till he was found. There was no point in prolonging it. I'd be clear of the ship and the spaceport of Jerris, Renn's principal city, long before they found him, anyway.

Back in the busy part of the ship, busier than ever now, I tried to look as unconcerned as I had really been before.

But first I burned the coded message and flushed the ashes down a head. It was no use to me, and far too dangerous to carry about with me. Straight codes in which something equals something can almost invariably be broken, but I could do the Kolperian secret service the justice of assuming that I wouldn't be able to break their code from one short sample.

I showed myself in public again, and almost at once the blonde stewardess came on me from behind. "Mr. Lees, if you don't *want* your radiogram, by all means —"

Patiently I explained that I already had it.

"Not that one," she said. "The other one."

I went and collected the second radiogram. I had a moment of sheer, unreasoning terror that it would tell me to disregard the previous message, that there was no Kolperian agent — that I had killed a man for nothing.

But I remembered the gun in Fenner's hand and the identification card in Fenner's pocket.

The radiogram, decoded, read:

Alliance with Renn now almost essential. Nova Simla negotiations continue, but now unlikely to end favorably. Ignore Kolperians and go ahead with survey openly. Extreme urgency required. If your decision on Rennians is favorable, you are empowered to bring about an alliance on any reasonable terms. You will be backed as official ambassador if necessary, with full powers to negotiate pact.

Ignore Kolperians, for Pete's sake!

If by any chance Fenner had been the only one and the Kolperians otherwise ignored *me*, that might be possible. However, whoever sent that message didn't know I'd just liquidated Fenner.

For the rest, this looked like an opportunity to achieve storybook success. But no one ever does achieve

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storybook success in politics. In exploration, athletics or research, perhaps.

In politics all you ever achieve is evasion of disaster.

II.

I had never been on Renn. I walked the streets of Jerris looking about me with interest, not pretending to be anything but a stranger. When I got back to my hotel, the Sunway, there would probably be a policeman waiting for me to ask if I knew anything about a dead man in a storeroom in the ship I had just left. But I tried to forget that.

There were a lot of things I had to forget, or at least put out of mind for the moment. Being only human, like most people, I ran over them briefly before I forgot them.

The fact that Fenner had had a coded dispatch in his pocket suggested that he had not yet communicated with his superiors about me. If it had been sent, he would certainly never retain the copy. And the only important thing he seemed likely to have to communicate was that he had identified a Vernan agent who was going to Renn on an important mission, and that he was following him to find out what it was.

So there was an excellent chance that in removing Fenner I had removed all Kolperian interest in me. That was all to the good.

My job originally had been merely to find out about Renn and the Rennians and report on them to the Vernan Minister for Galactic Affairs. On the basis of the report an alliance with Renn would become urgent business or an abandoned project.

Now I practically had to negotiate the alliance myself, before Kolper discovered that Nova Simla had failed us.

I was still supposed to find out first whether, on the basis of what I could learn about Renn and the Rennian character, the alliance was desirable or not. But the fact that Nova Simla was out and the general tone of the last radiogram made it pretty clear that the alliance had better be desirable.

Basically the situation was this. The main powers in the Fourth Sector were Verna and Kolper. Verna and Kolper weren't at war and probably never would be. From their situation and history, however, they would probably always be rivals. Sometimes, for a few years, circumstances would force them into an uneasy alliance, during which they would develop a vociferous patriotism for the Fourth Sector. But most of the time they would be maneuvering for ascendancy, neither achieving it for long.

At the moment Verna and the twin planets of a nearby sun, Lobak and Bluemist, formed one group and Kolper, Florestan and Torris the other. The cast might change, but Verna and Kolper were likely to remain the leading players.

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Also in the Fourth Sector and reasonably well developed were Renn, Erith and Nova Simla.

Now it was well known that in the undercover campaigning for allies the real effort of Verna was towards Nova Simla, and the main effort of Kolper (through Florestan) towards Erith. Like many things which are well known, this might be false. There was, however, no particular reason why it should be. Kolper (through Torris) had an apparently minor mission to Nova Simla, and Verna (through Lobak) a similar mild interest in Erith.

The information I'd just received meant that in the battle for balance Verna was having to change horses in midstream. Nova Simla was out; Renn or Erith would have to come in as understudy.

Erith was none of my business. Renn was, very much so.

I put all that out of mind, and all I had ever heard about Renn, too. You can't practise psychostatistics unless you have the faculty of dropping all preconceived ideas and starting from scratch.

I was no longer a Vernan agent, merely a psychostatistician doing a report as part of a market survey for a Vernan-Lobakian trading combine. (There was such a trading combine, and it was going to use my report.)

I visited the police in the usual way, and this visit followed the usual pattern except at the end. I had no trouble in getting to the Commissioner himself and explaining my business. There was no mention of the *Apple Honey* at first, though I deliberately mentioned I was just in from Verna.

The Commissioner looked at me, caught between a frown and a smile, and said: "Quite frankly, Mr. Lees, it would simplify things a lot for us if psychostatistics were banned by international law."

I treated that as a joke.

"You come, in effect, and tell us," sighed the Commissioner, "that you're going to create dozens of disturbances, upset scores of people, break laws and regulations right and left, but since that's part of your job, all in the cause of knowledge, and you come and warn us you're going to do it, will we please not press any charges?"

I continued to treat the affair lightly — all a psychostatistician can do in such circumstances. If the police liked, they could make it almost impossible for us to do a job at all. Approaches to police differ — I know that some psychostatisticians take a strong line, as they call it. That works for just so long. Then they come up against a police department which tells them bluntly that the first wrong move they make is going to land them in jail.

And after that they might as well pack up and go home.

I've always found that the best thing to do is admit I'm a nuisance, let the police say what they like, get permission to go ahead, however

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grudging, and then get all the more outrageous stuff over with as quickly as possible. If the police object again when one or two people complain, I can always tell them that there will be no more incidents of that sort, and they almost invariably let me finish the job.

Statistical surveys have become essential to us. The trouble a psychostatistician causes is generally regarded as a necessary evil. And every psychostatistician takes care to assure himself of official backing, international if necessary, before he'll accept a difficult commission.

So it was here. The Commissioner sighed again. "Well, I suppose if I'm going to let you carry on, I'd better do it with as good grace as possible. Any time you're going to start a riot you might let us know. Now just a moment — you came in on the *Apple Honey* this morning, didn't you?"

Since he had just given me his modified blessing, I didn't seem to be suspected — yet — of any implication in what was certainly coming now, the death of Fenner. I nodded in an interrogative sort of way.

The Commissioner pressed a button on his desk. A woman came in. "You wanted to speak to Mr. Anthony Lees, didn't you, Lieutenant?" he said. "Mr. Lees, this is Lieutenant Belling."

I didn't quite know how to take Lieutenant Belling, but my first impulse was certainly to take her if I could. She was in light-blue uniform, tunic and slacks, and though she had that cool-hard-efficient look that women often get when they're extremely capable of looking after themselves, it didn't make her any less attractive.

She knew exactly who I was, and went straight to the point.

"Did you meet Charles Fenner on board the ship, Mr. Lees?" she asked.

I shook my head. She produced a photograph of the man I had killed.

"Recognize him?"

I shook my head again. "I may have seen him on the ship," I said. "But I couldn't be sure."

"He was a Vernan, and he came from Roqual, on Verna, same as you."

"About two-thirds of the passengers on the ship did. Why, what's he done?"

"He's been found dead on the ship."

There was a certain challenge in the way she said it, as though she knew I knew already that Fenner was dead — and as though she knew something I didn't know she knew. She wasn't bothering to hide the fact that she'd been looking for me, me particularly, and had probably had a dozen different nets out to catch me when I simplified matters by walking into police headquarters.

"In his cabin?" I asked blankly. "Suicide?"

"No, to both. Mr. Lees, you should be able to help us in this matter," she said sharply. "You're a

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psychostatistician, aren't you?"

"So he's just been warning me," said the Commissioner dryly.

"Surely," pursued Lieutenant Belling, frowning, "you must have noticed something you can tell us . . . being blind, deaf and dumb surely aren't the best qualifications for a psychostatistician?"

I looked at her. I just looked. Just looking, however, had no effect whatever.

"When do you think the man was killed?" I asked.

"Just before landing — about an hour before."

This was the first piece of complete and accurate information she had given me.

I shook my head. "I know what you mean, but for two reasons I can't help you. One is that all through the trip I've been deliberately *not* noticing things as a psychostatistician. The other is that the last couple of hours before landing were chaos . . . it would have been difficult to notice anything significant even if I'd been watching for it."

That didn't please Lieutenant Belling much. "Wouldn't a psychostatistician," she said, hinting in her tone that though that wasn't much, I wasn't even that, "be bound to notice significant things in the middle of chaos?"

"No. On the contrary, any psychostatistician investigating anything would tend to be lost when things were abnormal. He'd wait, if that was at all possible, until things were normal again. It's the normal we study — the exceptions, the abnormal, we take great pains to exclude."

"I see." She said it with faint, disdainful incredulity, as though she had always suspected something of the sort but had never quite been able to believe psychostatisticians were as bad as all that. "Well, thank you very much, Mr. Lees."

"Not at all. Sorry I haven't been able to help more. You can find me at the Sunway if you want me."

They left it at that and I left it at that.

When I was on my way out, however, Lieutenant Belling weakened for one dazzling fraction of a second. Any woman who isn't psychotic likes to be admired, and even the lieutenant couldn't help smiling at me, just to show she could, and what it was like when she did.

I didn't want to pay her any compliments, but I couldn't help remarking: "If you're in the homicide bureau here, Lieutenant, I'm going right out to commit a murder to put you hot on my trail."

"You needn't bother," she retorted. "I'm there already."

It had been a much fiercer skirmish than it looked.

I wish I could show you Lieutenant Belling, so that you wouldn't have to take my word for her. You know those tough, independent heroines of fiction and films who

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guntote their way through a dozen hair-rising experiences but finally collapse in tears in the hero's arms to prove they're feminine after all. Well, Belling might not be as tough as these gun-slinging high-heeled hellions at the beginning, but I could tell right away she was going to be a lot tougher in the end. She wasn't going to collapse in tears in my arms or anyone else's.

She was very, very good, that woman. Words can't describe her sometimes sharp, sometimes cold, always needling tone. She kept you always on the point of snapping back with something to take her down a peg or two, or to show her she didn't know everything. That was cleverly and neatly calculated.

Also she was very good at saying things nearly right, but not quite, so that if you know better you could hardly help slipping in the small correction which was all that was necessary. Fenner's first name was Clark, not Charles, and he was a Kolperian, not a Vernan. And the way she hinted that I couldn't be a very good psychostatistician, if I was one at all, thanked me for nothing and told me at the end that she was still on my trail for Fenner's murder, would have made most people lash out with something.

Of course, I wasn't most people.

And Lieutenant Belling wasn't just any woman police officer.

I went back into the streets of Jerris and started work right away. In a way my methods weren't unlike Belling's; perhaps in respecting her I was boosting my own ego.

I talked to every fifteenth person my eyes happened to rest on. At first I spoke as a stranger to Renn, but presently, when I found people didn't know by looking at me and talking to me that I was a stranger, I stopped admitting it.

The brief conversation pieces were based on quite a variety of things. Sometimes I was rude, fresh, persistent; sometimes people talked easily and freely. Sometimes I merely said a few words, not demanding any answer: sometimes I made a Wedding Guest of myself.

Why are you in such a hurry?

I didn't know I was in a hurry. I mean —

You've been tearing along like a fire engine.

Oh. Well, I . . . I . . .

Maybe you wonder what business it is of mine?

Oh, no, I . . . I . . .

I didn't write down any of the replies, or even attempt to remember them in any detail. Psychostatistics generally isn't concerned in detail. You have to avoid being unable to see the wood for the trees.

Do you want to buy a battleship?

Eh? What's that?

Do you want to buy a battleship?

Okay, mister, you win. What's the answer?

It has been said, contemptuously, that psychostatistics is the science of forming prejudices. But the dif-

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ference between ordinary prejudices and psychostatistical impressions is that prejudices characterize only the individual who has them, while the impressions a psychostatistician forms are calculated to be significant only of the subject, trend or persons being surveyed.

How many garments are you wearing, miss?

What's that you say? Are you speaking to me?

I'm making a textiles survey. I wonder if you'd list for me the items of clothing you're wearing at this moment?

But I — surely you don't mean . . . Oh well. What exactly do you want me to tell you?

My victims were of all types. I practically insured that by refusing to allow myself to break the every-fifteenth-person rule, even when apparently no one but the god of mathematics was going to object or even know.

Do you want to buy a battleship?

Sure, leave it at the back door.

All is grist to a psychostatistician's mill, but some evidence is positive and some merely negative. The trouble is, you have to chase after the uninteresting negative evidence if you're going to get full value out of your positive evidence.

Charles Darwin used to note most particularly all facts contrary to his own theories and beliefs, because he knew he was liable to forget these facts if he could.

Psychostatisticians not only have to note unwelcome facts — they have to go out looking for them, leaving no stone unturned until they find them.

Get the key out of that car for me, sonny.

Say, mister —

Do as you're told. I'm not speaking for fun.

But I can't —

Sure you can. It won't take you more than fifteen seconds.

Is it . . . is it your car, mister?

Naturally it's my car. You don't think I'd be asking you to steal the key, do you? I'm just too lazy to cross the street and get it myself. Go on, get it!

He did, too. And an old man let me read everything he had in his wallet, not liking to refuse. A large, untidy blonde, blushing violently, answered every question I could think of about her love life, obviously wishing to flee but scared I'd shout the embarrassing questions after her.

There were refusals, of course. I had to have refusals — I had to go on trying more and more outrageous things until I got refusals.

Come and have a drink somewhere, honey.

Are you talking to me?

Who else?

Then please don't.

I'm not fooling, baby. If you know what's good for you, you'll . . .

Oh, go to hell.

And the time I asked a middle-aged man to deliver something for

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me, though it meant going a couple of miles out of his way.

Sorry. I haven't the time. I really haven't.

I'm telling you you've got to have the time. I can't take it myself.

Then get some delivery service.

I'm not going to ask you again.

That's good. I've told you I'm sorry. I'd do it if I could, but . . .

The refusals were rare. The Rennians could be bulldozed into almost anything. It wasn't just politeness, either. Several times they did a thing though they didn't want to do it, simply because they were scared of me.

I was beginning to have some strong ideas about the Rennians. I could hardly help it.

The Rennians were sheep. Any ordinary bully could force almost any of them to do almost anything he liked. They were polite, friendly and obliging, and if you took advantage of their politeness, they let you. They weren't polite enough to pretend they *wanted* to comply with your most outrageous demands. But they did comply with them, almost always.

Yes, the Rennians were so timid it was surprising more advantage hadn't been taken of them to date.

And now that I had found that for myself, it was quite in order for me to compare what I had heard about the Rennians before I came to Jerris with what I had actually found.

The Rennians were exactly as I had expected.

III

Urgency was all very well, but that was enough for one day. I went back to my hotel, wondering whether I was going to be left in peace or not.

I wasn't.

The hall of the Sunway was a friendly, comfortable place peopled by the overflow from the lounges and cocktail bars. If the carpets had been any thicker you'd have felt, walking on them, that they needed mowing. A good psychological touch, thick carpets. They make you walk slowly and that makes you feel relaxed. The lights were subdued, very kind to female complexions — particularly that of a sleek blonde who was drawing two glances to every one any other woman in the place could command.

She was wearing evening pajamas in heavy satin that kept gliding gracefully between blue, turquoise and green. Despite the fact that she revealed some flesh and a magnificent shape, she was still Lieutenant Belling, and proceeded to prove it.

"You haven't by any chance," she said pleasantly, "had second thoughts about anything we were talking about earlier today, Mr. Lees?"

I ignored the question. "There came a big spider and sat down beside her," I said, doing so.

"But with very little risk of frightening Miss Muffet away," she said.

"Can I count on that? No matter what I do?"

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She put her hand on my wrist and gripped hard — very hard.

"This may be fun for you," she said grimly, "but it isn't fun for me. It's a murder case. Do you understand that?"

"How can I treat it as anything but fun?" I asked, but I spoke seriously enough. "Listen. Let's assume for a start, just for the sake of argument, that I didn't kill this man Fenner and don't know anything about his death."

"All right. I'll assume that, for the sake of argument. Then what?"

"Then you start asking questions which I can't answer. And I'm here, at considerable expense to my employers, to do a job which I can only do if you let me. I've got to treat this murder case lightly. If I crawl on my hands and knees in front of you, you'll be practically forced to turn the screw a little, just to —"

"That's one side of it," she admitted. "Makes me feel quite sorry for you."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said in a mollified tone.

"Before I burst into tears, perhaps you'll tell me what the two code messages you received just before the *Apple Honey* landed were about?"

"Since a murder is involved," I said slowly, "perhaps I will. One was telling me a shoe firm had just joined the combine I'm working for. It probably won't make any difference to my report, but I like to know who I'm working for. The other —"

"Do you expect me to believe that a message like that would be sent to you on board ship, in code, at an expense of roughly eight thousand international dollars, when the same information could have been got to you about twelve hours later at a cost of two hundred dollars?"

I surveyed her wryly. "Look, if I'm going to be put through the mill like this, do you mind coming up to my room and interrogating me there?"

She rose. "Not at all. Why?"

It surprised me that she raised no objection. I had only made the suggestion to gain a little time.

"I always like to defend my honor in private," I said mildly. "Don't you?"

"Drink?" I asked.

"A little vermouth," she said.

Again to my surprise, she had allowed me plenty of time to think. She hadn't spoken on the way up except to ask, very mildly for her, if the management wouldn't object to my entertaining women in my room.

"If they do," I had said, "we can tell them some story or other — perhaps that you're a police officer interrogating me in a murder case."

Now she was leaning back on the sofa, and as I gave her the vermouth I said reasonably: "Look here, Lieutenant, I simply can't go on calling you Lieutenant Belling."

She smiled. "You can call me Vicky," she said.

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Now this was all very well, but it pulled no wool over my eyes. If she gave me time to think up an explanation of those code messages, she must be pretty sure I didn't really need it. If she came to my room and accepted a drink from me, she must expect to get more out of me than she would have got in the hall. And if she said I could call her Vicky, she must be intending me to lower my guard so that she could slip a knife between my ribs.

You can see the sort of opinion I had of . . . Vicky.

Incidentally — and I regretted very much that it was only incidentally — she made a stunning picture as she leaned back and sipped her drink. Not the least stunning thing about it was that her hip pocket, stretched tight, quite obviously contained a small automatic. Either she had forgotten it would show or she didn't care.

"Now about these messages," she said. "Why the code? And why eight thousand dollars instead of two hundred?"

I got a piece of paper and started working something out on it. "Before we come to that," I said, "perhaps I'd better get you prepared to believe the answer. I presume you've seen the message?"

"If I admitted that," she observed coolly, "you'd have grounds for a privacy-violation case, which you wouldn't win, but which would tie our hands for the next week at least."

It was true. Unfortunately, messages for me on Verna simply had to be sent by civil, more or less public, subether radio. There could not be any private communication between planets, let alone star systems. There was one way, and one way only, to get information from Verna to the *Apple Honey*, in space, or to Renn — the international subether radio.

So if there was any secrecy about messages, the codes employed had to be pretty good.

The difference in expense Vicky had mentioned was the difference between Class A and Class D radiograms. Mine had been sent direct to the ship, guaranteed delivery (!), with a private clause that was supposed to protect the contents from anybody. Sent Class D, it would have gone to Renn with thousands of other messages, would have been disentangled in no great hurry and would have waited in Jerris Post Office for me to come and pick it up.

"All right," I said. "We won't go into that. Here's the message that was sent to me, roughly. We'll pretend you've never seen it before. Now . . ."

I showed her a code that made it precisely the message I had told her it was. She nodded, not surprised.

"As to why my employers were prepared to spend eight thousand dollars on that," I went on, "the answer is the same if you ask why they're prepared to spend a hundred fifty thousand on this survey. They could have commissioned someone

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in Jerris to do a report of some sort for a hundred dollars, I suppose. But they wouldn't have been prepared to invest twenty million in a selling drive on that evidence. On mine —"

"I see," said Vicky. "They believe that the more they pay for a thing, the better it must be. Yes, that makes sense, I suppose. That being so, why did you kill Fenner?"

"I didn't," I said patiently.

She sighed, and stood up. Her hip pocket fell loose again, so that I couldn't actually see the automatic.

"You can go ahead meantime," she said, and walked out without so much as a So long, leaving me wondering.

Psychostatistics is a very useful science and it achieves some remarkable results sometimes. But its weakness is this: a psychostatistician is called in to find out about something, which means that not everything is known about it, which means that some of the assumptions he must make may be wrong. The occasional spectacular blobs of psychostatistics almost invariably arise out of a single wrong assumption.

Like the assumption someone had once made that since conditions on Megor V were so much more inimical than those of Megor VII, people would live longer on Megor V. Or the idea that since all Earth's oxygen-breathing organisms needed oxygen to survive, all Porus's oxygen-breathing organisms must, too. Or the assumption that young people would always adapt better to new conditions than old people.

All these things at one time or another had led to ludicrously wrong conclusions. Psychostatisticians were always on the lookout for similar pitfalls.

The possible pitfall in this case was that Verna wanted to know the pattern of Renn's reactions, and I could only investigate the Rennians.

A group, a nation, a world may not react as its individuals react.

Next day, since nothing came from Vicky or the Jerris police generally, I went on with my survey.

I tried jumping a few queues in Jerris, just to see what happened. I found out what happened — nothing at all.

You know what would happen if someone barged past a queue in your town, any queue, for anything. So do I. Well, in Jerris people just stared. Sometimes someone took a quick step forward, as if to do or say something, but then he or she decided not to do anything, after all, and stepped back with a shrug. Apart from that, a few muttered acid comments were all.

The way the Rennians looked at it, apparently, was this. The first few people in the queue saw nothing to hit the roof about, because one more didn't make any difference. And further down, people saw nothing to hit the roof about — because there were so many ahead anyway that one more didn't matter.

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In groups, in fact, they acted exactly as they did as individuals.

I made half a dozen other tests, including making a scene in a restaurant, that confirmed this.

Then I tried to start a fire scare in a cinema. I didn't expect to be successful. We may not be able to stop automobile and helicar accidents, but fire accidents are always being reduced in number and severity as fire-fighting and fireproofing improve. People don't have to be scared of fire the way they used to be. Fire scares get rarer and rarer.

However, when I tried to start a fire panic in a Jerris cinema I was startlingly successful. People dashed for the exits, women screamed, men shouted, someone switched on some lights to add to the confusion, and the shouting and screaming from the screen helped to swell the sudden, shocking, real-life panic. It was all so rapid that one moment I was still trying to start a scare, and the next, startled, I was trying desperately to stop it.

I managed that, too. The people who had been stampeding wildly in all directions slowed, stopped and came back sheepishly.

Sheepishly — that was it. They had panicked like sheep. Before that I had seen them acting individually like sheep. Exclude the suggestion of stupidity in the description, for the Rennians weren't stupid, and they *were* sheep.

Psychology proves that in capacity and intelligence all races are equal. But at the same time as it shows that people in many ways are exactly the same the galaxy over, statistical surveys show how vastly people can differ from town to town, let alone planet to planet.

If you make any unnecessary noise in Jason, Verna, you soon get yourself very solidly disliked. If you're lazy in Corranches, Kolper, it will get around and you'll find it difficult to get a job at all. People in Shane, Vermont, suspect anyone who doesn't smoke or drink — waiting for him to kick over the traces and carve someone up with a bread knife.

That's because people in Jason are comatose, people in Corranches work hard, and people in Shane are gay, demonstrative and reckless. Generalizations these may be — they tend to work out all the same.

And on Renn — to go by Jerris, at any rate — people were sheep.

It all worked out nicely, made a complete picture, except for Vicky Belling, the Commissioner, perhaps, and a statistically insignificant number of others I had encountered briefly.

Exceptions never prove the rule. I wanted very much to find why Vicky was different — and how many Rennians of either sex were like her.

I had had a day of grace, a day when I didn't have any code messages, didn't have any reminders of Verna-Kolper rivalry, heard nothing

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about Fenner — got on with the job without interruption, in fact.

It was a nice holiday, but it didn't last. The next day I met Vicky again.

It looked like an accident — anyway, it was supposed to be an accident, and it might well have been, for when I met her in the park she was visibly disconcerted for a fraction of a second before she realized what her face was telling me, and stopped it telling me anything.

It was a shock to me too, seeing Vicky dressed for effect . . . that kind of effect. She was wearing shorts, snazzy white briefs that showed up long dimpled legs and a very neat waist, and a crisp, translucent red blouse very loose about the arms and very tight about the breasts, and tiny cross-strapped shoes. . . . Call her cute and leave it at that.

"Vicky!" I exclaimed when I saw her, almost scandalized. It was like seeing a baseball report on the front page of the *Financial Journal*.

"Hello, Tony," she said, and went on hurriedly: "I'm just catching the sun . . ."

Then she recovered herself and said without preamble: "Fenner was a Kolperian."

We were close to the busiest part of Jerris, but it didn't obtrude itself. Two main streets ran parallel on either side of a park a quarter of a mile across. An electric railway bounded the gardens at one end and the administration buildings, in red granite, faced it at the other.

Thousands of people crossed the park every hour by its broad avenues. But there were other paths, shady, sheltered, narrow, which never saw people in a hurry. They were the paths for lovers, children, giggling girls, old men. Not long, straight walks, but curved, meandering paths screened but not hemmed in by shrubs and trees.

On one of these Vicky had been strolling, alone, yet not surprisingly alone. Even looking like that, she had a certain independent, warning, no-nonsense air about her that showed at a glance she was no ordinary, casual pinup pickup.

When she introduced the subject of Fenner so abruptly I protested: "Don't you ever give yourself a day off, Vicky?"

"I was looking for you anyway. I didn't expect to meet you *here*, but it doesn't matter. You could help me a lot if you liked, Mr. Lees — Tony . . . I said, Fenner was a Kolperian."

"I heard you. You said he was a Vernan. Now you say he's a Kolperian. Surely you'd be most concerned about him if he were a Rennian?"

"One of the things that makes me interested in you," she murmured, "is the way you keep dragging red herrings across the path."

"How is that a red herring?"

She ignored that.

"How much do you know about politics?" she asked instead. "Perhaps I should say: how much do you pretend to know?"

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"Quite a lot," I admitted. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, you're a Vernan. Fenner was a Kolperian."

"And you're a Rennian."

"That's a red herring again. Or is it? Kolper and Verna seem very interested in us just now. Of course, you wouldn't know anything about that."

She and I were strolling together now, not too close together. She didn't seem to care about watching my face for anything it might tell her, for she was staying a little ahead of me, looking down her legs with what might be complacency.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked.

"You're pretending not to know anything, aren't you?"

"No. Kolper and Verna are naturally very interested in you just now." I thought rapidly. Sometimes frankness is disarming: sometimes the truth and nothing but the truth can pass for the whole truth. "The question is, are you worth their interest?"

She stopped and turned, her eyes questioning.

"Oh, not you personally, Vicky," I said. "There's no doubt about that. You're worth anybody's interest. In fact, I —"

She shook her head impatiently.

"No, don't shake your head," I said warmly. "You needn't think you're a failure in life just because you're only a police officer instead of a wife and mother of three children. It isn't too late to —"

She laughed. "One thing at a time, Tony. Another time we'll continue that line of discussion. Meantime —"

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes, it's a promise — but I'll pick the time. Meantime — you said the question is, is Renn worth the interest of Kolper and Verna?"

"As a matter of fact," I said casually, "my report on Renn will go not only to the trading combine I told you about, but also to the Vernan Minister for Galactic Affairs — unofficially, of course — and on the basis of that . . ."

She was hanging on my words. So I stopped and said modestly: "I don't want you to think I'm boasting just because I'm with a pretty girl."

She was on the point of saying something ill-considered.

But then, shockingly, incredibly, something whistled between us, gouged a furrow in the pathway and ricocheted into the bushes to our left.

It looked as if someone was trying to kill us — one of us, at least.

Vicky dropped to squat on her heels, taking her head below the level of the bushes behind us. But even as she did so she was looking at me to see my reaction.

"Another red herring, Tony?" she inquired coldly.

IV

I didn't ask what she meant. When you've just been shot at you

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may very possibly be shot at again, and the sensible thing to do is get out of the way of the next shot, if any.

We did precisely that. Vicky wouldn't go down on the gravel on her flawless knees, but she kept well down all the same. Much less worried about my knees than about preserving a whole skin, I dropped hard on them and scuttled out of the way.

The shot couldn't have come from the park, unless someone was up a tree. Squatting on her heels, Vicky soon established where it must have come from — an upper window of the administration building, through a gap in the foliage above us. I saw her establish it.

"That means it's you, not me, that was meant for," I grunted.

"How do you figure that?"

"Because even with a telescopic sight, I couldn't be identified from that distance, in the shade, through the trees. But *you* could." And I nodded pointedly at her blinding white shorts and vivid red blouse. "You might almost have been making a target of yourself."

She sniffed impatiently. "That proves nothing," she retorted. "Come on."

She broke into a crouching run, not looking to see if I was with her. I followed, not in quite such a hurry. Before people fire snap shots like that they make sure of their escape afterwards.

Vicky ran well, coming erect recklessly as we came out into the open park. People in the gardens seeing her running out of the shadows with me after her grinned and didn't do anything, drawing the wrong conclusion. The shot had been silent, of course.

Then, to my surprise, a man in a blue suit appeared from the main doorway of the administration buildings Vicky was making for, saw us coming and took to his heels. Vicky streaked after him. I did my best, but I was all out of streaks.

In the next few minutes we had another beautiful demonstration of the Rennian character. We chased Blue Suit out of the park, along three streets, through a lane, into a building and out at the back, down a flight of stone steps.

And nobody did anything about it. People stared, certainly, particularly at Vicky. Jerris wasn't one of the few cities in the galaxy in which hers was normal street wear. Apart from staring, no one would do anything. I tried shouting, "Stop thief!" but it was a waste of breath, and I needed all my breath. More than that, in fact.

The hundreds, perhaps thousands of people who saw the chase decided it was none of their business, certainly nothing to get mixed up in. Vicky, the man in the blue suit and I might have been alone in a dead city for all the part anyone else took in the chase.

We lost Blue Suit at last and stopped, panting, to discuss the mat-

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ter. We were in a dead end which was not only deserted but looked as if it had always been deserted, from the beginning of time.

Vicky had never been more attractive. Her breathlessness, her heaving breast, her high color and her disarranged hair all had something to do with it.

Most of all, however, she turned to me impulsively to see if there was anything I could do. Most girls are attractive when they turn to you for help, provided they haven't made a habit of it.

I kissed her.

I knew I shouldn't have done it, when she turned to me trustingly like that, but after all . . .

She jumped back, her eyes sparking fire. "I suppose that makes you feel pleased with yourself," she exclaimed fiercely.

"And with you," I assured her. "It was very sweet."

We looked at each other for long seconds, Vicky blazing and me licking my lips, as it were.

Presently, however, we decided tacitly that being shot at was more important, after all, than this side-issue.

"I should have known better than to join the procession," I observed, thoughtfully. "That fellow could have lost us any time he liked. He was leading us away from someone else. I should have let you chase him and gone after the other one."

"Perhaps so," Vicky admitted, still smoldering, "and perhaps I was right the first time — when I asked if this was another red herring of yours."

"What are you getting at?"

"That was a mad shot if it was meant to kill either of us. I think it was meant to miss us. We were meant to do exactly what we've done."

"It's possible," I agreed.

"Then whoever was responsible knew who you were, and who I was, and the shot was meant to show me . . ."

She stopped.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Motor run down?"

"No, but perhaps I should keep my thinking to myself."

I hesitated. It seemed to me that more was likely to be lost than could possibly be gained by continuing the discussion.

"That's fair," I said. "What's the result of all this? Am I under arrest for having someone take a shot at you and me, or should I offer to take you home, or what?"

"I can . . ." She was on the point of saying, "I can find my own way home, thank you." Just in time, however, she realized how silly that was going to make her look.

"Well," she temporized, "you could be helpful, if you behave yourself."

"Don't I always?"

"When I drove to the park, I hardly expected all this," she said, ignoring my remark. "I know I've

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been dashing through the streets after the man in blue, but that was necessary. . . . Would you go and get my car and pick me up here?"

She was asking a favor, but ready to snap back at me in five minutes, or less, if necessary, and trying to make it clear, too, that in another five minutes we might be at loggerheads again.

"All right, Vicky," I said pleasantly. "But I suppose you realize that Blue Suit may still be around, and *might* want to kill you? Someone should stay with you while I'm getting your car."

"And who do you suggest should do so?" she asked acidly.

"Me," I said blandly.

She looked at me sulfurously, and I left her.

While I was getting Vicky's car I did some thinking too.

She was right enough, anyone who could have missed us in those circumstances could have hit us if he liked. It wasn't worth writing a thesis on it: it stood to reason that if there was any sense in the incident at all, it had happened exactly as it had been meant to happen.

Very well, someone knew I was a Vernan agent. The purpose of the shot could hardly have been to frighten me, and it was unlikely that its primary purpose was to tell me the Kolperians knew all about me.

No, the incident had been intended to keep Vicky's interest riveted on me. What purpose that would serve I didn't know, unless something else was planned, to come up very soon. Which was very likely.

Someone knew a lot more about this whole business than I did.

Let's see now, I said to myself. In words of one syllable or more, and ideas a six-year-old could understand: There had been a murder, Vicky was investigating it, and something had given her a strong idea that I was implicated in it. The something might well be Kolperian in origin.

The fact that I had removed one agent from my path didn't mean I had destroyed the entire Kolperian espionage organization.

One possible, quite simple and probably effective campaign which the Rennian branch of the Kolperian Spies' Union might have hit on was this. Knowing or guessing that I had killed Fenner, they had manufactured some piece of evidence which I certainly hadn't left, and made sure the Rennian police found it. They were probably watching all the time, and they had taken advantage of my meeting Vicky like that to rivet her attention on me by shooting at us. The third act was to come. It would be something which, taken in conjunction with the other two incidents, would dispose of me quite effectively. I could think of quite a few things which would serve. In each case I'd be detained, jailed or even executed by the Rennians, without anyone else appearing in the picture.

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That was neat work. Espionage isn't cloak-and-dagger stuff any more, it's maneuvering so that the desired effect comes about by itself. If the Kolperians murdered me, they wouldn't know much about me or anything about my successor, and the Rennian police would be left to work out that a Vernan secret agent had killed a Kolperian operative and in turn had been killed by Kolperian agents. If my conclusions were correct, and the Kolperian plan was carried out, the Rennian police would have a solved, completed case for their records and nothing it would even occur to them to investigate further.

It would be a Kolperian victory, leaving me beaten, discredited and possibly dead.

Once more I reached a negative verdict on the desirability of ever having been born.

I walked back the way we had come so precipitately. Vicky had given me her car key and told me where the car was. It occurred to me that I didn't have a local driving license, but since a police officer had practically instructed me to drive her car, there probably wasn't a summons coming on that.

I did some more thinking.

Of course, there were several ways out for me, even though I didn't know my enemies and had no hope, in Jerris, of finding them as easily as I had found Fenner on the *Apple Honey*.

One was to decide the job was over and go home. That was the simple and obviously correct course. The only thing against it was that it was too simple and too correct.

Renn wasn't going to be a valuable ally. In forming alliances such as Verna intended in this case, you have to be quite sure that your new partner is going to be an asset and not a liability.

That was why I'd been sent to Renn. I should be able to say pretty definitely what kind of partner Renn would make, and either promise half the galaxy to induce Renn to join us, leave Renn severely alone, or do what I could to push Renn into Kolper's arms, if she was really going to be a serious liability.

Balance, balance, balance — that's what you're concerned with in galactic politics all the time, everywhere.

Distance, power and wealth are the three things that matter when you have hundreds of human settlements on scores of different worlds. They act and interact on each other.

Distance: striking distance, trading distance, communication distance, tourist distance, safe distance.

Power: size, strength, population, stability, character, level of culture, level of technology, ideology, type of world, supply lines, versatility, adaptability.

Wealth: money, minerals, productivity, expansion index, capital assets, economic policy.

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Now it might be that if Renn joined Kolper — Renn in her position in space, Renn with the wealth and poverty she possessed, Renn with what strength and weakness she had now and would have in the future — it might be that if Renn joined Kolper, Verna and her sister worlds would be slowly, gradually, inexorably hemmed in, cut off, frozen, starved, undermined, collapsed, destroyed.

It might be, on the other hand, that there was no risk of any such disaster happening unless Verna was unwise enough to take Renn under her wing.

It was up to me to make a snap judgment.

Nothing new in that. Will you put a thousand dollars into a company to manufacture automobiles — and twenty years later draw out five million?

Or will you put your savings into atomic drives for spaceships — and lose every penny when a warp drive makes atomic space travel obsolete?

It looks so easy afterwards, when the significant factors have been shown to be significant.

But at the time — at the time?

Just as I reached the parking lot at the other side of the gardens I realized what I should have been thinking instead of all this — and broke into a run, not to mention a cold sweat.

I had said, in fun, that it might be dangerous to leave Vicky alone. I had thought then that though there might be some slight danger in leaving her, she would be perfectly capable of handling it herself. She would have her tiny automatic in her pocket as usual, I imagined.

But it hadn't occurred to me then that the perfect third act in the hypothetical Kolperian plan would be *the murder of Vicky;* with all the clues pointing to me as the killer, and just after hundreds of people had seen me chasing her.

That would finish the Fenner case and explain everything. It would finish me, if the crime was neatly enough arranged.

It would also, incidentally, finish Vicky, an innocent bystander in the whole thing.

I dashed round the park looking for a car I had never seen. They all seemed to be gray convertibles, and the numbers of almost all of them began AS 17 VL. It was a huge park and Vicky hadn't been very exact in her description of the location of her car.

Finally, after wasting five minutes, I realized the attendants must know Lieutenant Belling of the Jerris Police, and went to the kiosk.

A tall thin man in bottle-green uniform did know Lieutenant Belling and her car, but he didn't know me or any reason why he should let me take the car away. I started to argue, then had a sudden, shocking vision of Vicky lying in the alley where I had left her, with her white shorts stained red.

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I knew Vicky's car now. "I'll come back later and argue," I said, and ran to the car, ignoring the protests and then shouts behind me.

The car started and swept out of the parking lot all right, but almost at once my comparative ignorance of the layout of Jerris caught up with me. I couldn't drive back as I had just come, through the park, and I wasn't sure of any other way. I wasted ten minutes getting to the other side of the park, finding that first one opening and then another led so far and no further. On the other side at last, I took no more chances and followed the route I knew instead of trying to manufacture short cuts.

I took the car right into the blind alley. From the end of it I could see clear along it.

Once more it was deserted. Again it looked as if it had always been deserted.

I got out of the car, looked round carefully and failed to see any sign of any living being. Nobody could be watching — there were no windows visible from where I stood.

I looked down, and where Vicky had been standing there was a smear of blood. Not much, but it was blood, and still sticky.

That was that, apparently. I could have been wild over what had probably happened to Vicky, if I hadn't been even more concerned about what was going to happen to me.

There was no clue, apart from the blood-smear on the sidewalk. She could have been taken anywhere.

I cursed myself for not having seen the obvious. If you're prepared to commit murder as part of the scheme, it's quite simple to frame almost anybody. . . .

I wasn't being unduly defeatist, I was just giving my opponents the credit of assuming they knew what they were doing.

I left Vicky's car where it was, locked, and hurried back to the Sunway. It was taking a risk going there, but anything was a risk now. At any moment, anywhere, I might be arrested for the murder of Lieutenant Belling, or her abduction, or whatever charge they had designed.

At the desk the receptionist gave me two radiograms from Verna. I read them there and then. The first one was a double-code message about a toothpaste firm's request for a special survey of the brands of toothpaste preferred on Renn, and why. Decoded, the real message read:

Alliance with Nova Simla concluded. Continue Rennian survey, but Vernan-Rennian alliance is now unlikely.

The other was a triple-code message, going one better, in which the real message read tersely:

Florestan-Erith pact signed.

I stood in the hall where I had once met Vicky and thought grimly. One of those messages was false.

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Therefore they both could be. Or one could be false, one genuine, and the people who sent the false message could have known the real one.

The first one let me out. In the circumstances, it freed me to jump the next ship and get out of Renn, if I could. Though it told me to continue the survey, it made it clear that the survey no longer mattered.

The second one made it absolutely imperative for an alliance to be formed, on such terms as I could get. With the Florestan-Erith pact concluded, Verna simply had to have Renn, on any terms. Naturally we'd try to get the best terms we could, but Renn could ask for what she liked and get it.

Unfortunately it was the first one that was false. I knew that from things that were wrong when they should have been right, things that were right when they should have been wrong, the number of letters in the first word and the number of vowels in the trade-code message.

But the second message could be genuine. I'd never have suspected it for an instant if it hadn't been for that other message. . . .

Message two could be read, like the other, as double-code, VL and DE. VL gave a market-survey instruction, DE gave *Greatest urgency required*, and the real message was in FAV below that. FAV was supposed to be known only to seven people.

An interesting thought about message one occurred to me.

Suppose it was intended to be identified as a fake?

I didn't move until I thought I could make sense of the situation. Then, marveling at the perfidy of man, I went up to my room.

V

From my room I called Vicky's home address, which I found in the phone book, just in case she had arrived there. There was no reply.

I didn't call the police. There had never been any insanity in my family.

I just sat and marveled. First at the neat little plot to drive me exactly where my unknown opponent wanted, and second at the paradox of the Rennians.

It was less than half an hour before there was a decidedly peremptory rap on my door. When I opened up, three men in the uniform of the Jerris police faced me.

"Anthony Lees, I arrest you on a charge of murdering Lieutenant Belling of the Jerris Police," said the middle one formally. And three minutes later I was in a car being taken to police headquarters.

The Commissioner regarded me with mingled regret and satisfaction.

"Well, Mr. Lees," he said pleasantly, "I must say this is a surprise. I knew you were going to commit a whole series of minor crimes, but I certainly didn't think we were going to have the pleasure of trying you on a murder charge."

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"Was it also a pleasure to get rid of Lieutenant Belling?" I asked equally pleasantly.

"No," said the Commissioner, and now regret was uppermost. "She was a most promising officer. I hope you hang for killing her, Mr. Lees."

"How was she killed, and where?" I asked conversationally.

"I take it, then, your plea is going to be not guilty when this comes to trial? You're going to refuse, from the start, to admit any knowledge of the murder?"

"Not at all," I said. "I know all about it. Whom do I talk to, Commissioner?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm supposed to claim diplomatic immunity now, I suppose," I observed, "and try to prove I wouldn't have murdered Vicky in my position, and that Kolperian agents framed me. . . . You'll keep saying, 'What do you mean, Mr. Lees?' and 'You don't expect me to believe that, surely, Mr. Lees,' until the Vernan Ambassador comes along and suggests you take me seriously. Then things will become coldly correct and you'll dicker for a bit before you decide to recognize me as Vernan representative and talk business with me, under protest. I'll be in such a bad position, with Kolperian representatives lurking in the background all the time, making things difficult for me, and a murder charge not quite forgotten, that —"

I stopped him as he was about to interrupt me.

"Don't, Commissioner," I begged. "Don't let's go through the farce of playing out a bluff that has failed."

He was going to do it, nevertheless, which convinced me that though he knew what I was talking about he wasn't one of the big men in the Rennian plot. We exchanged a few more similar remarks that got us nowhere.

Then Vicky came in and ended the farce. She must have been listening in an adjoining room.

"You can talk to me, Tony," she said. "It was my scheme, and it must have been my fault you saw through it. Where did I go wrong?"

They shouldn't have given up so early. I didn't know until that moment that I had guessed right.

The Rennians had known about me all along. Either they had advance information about me or they had guessed — no, they must have *known* I was empowered to conclude the whole Vernan-Rennian deal, from the radiograms I had received on the ship. Those codes were supposed to be unbreakable, and they probably were — somewhere else, in some other way, Rennians had managed to steal them. They must have a pretty good espionage organization themselves.

They knew I could negotiate with them, and they were prepared to deal with me. But like the foxy, greedy, unscrupulous lot they were they hit on a scheme to get diamond-studded terms out of me.

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Kolperians. I knew the Kolperians might be rivals for the hand of Renn — why not convince me they were?

Tiny, convincing hints of evidence in the Fenner case, which could only be false evidence supplied by Kolperians. The shot in the park — Kolperians again. Just to make sure — a spurious radiogram telling me what the Kolperians would want me to think, if they were working for a pact with Renn and wanted me out of the way. Who would want me to think that Verna had concluded an alliance with Nova Simla, and that a Vernan-Rennian alliance was off, except Kolper? Certainly not Renn, if that idea had ever crossed my mind.

Yet at the same time it had to be clear to me that the message was a fake. . . .

"Chiefly when you made all those mistakes in the fake message from Verna," I told Vicky. "It wasn't a code that could be broken. Anyone who had the secret of the codes would have had the secret of the safeguards — some of them, anyway. I don't think you could have got me to accept a false message as genuine, even if you'd been trying. But there were far too many mistakes in that one."

Vicky sighed. "We underestimated you," she admitted.

Only a little, though. Almost to the end I'd been prepared to believe in the Kolperian plot to make me impotent by framing me, and might have allowed myself to be maneuvered into the worst possible bargaining position. How the Rennians were going to work that I didn't know, but I could imagine how they would have taken advantage of my equivocal position and a hypothetical Kolperian offer to drive a very hard bargain indeed.

"I might say the same," I said, and grinned at her.

She was back in tunic and slacks, at her most businesslike. But I could remember vividly what kissing her had been like, and, the Vernan-Rennian pact apart, I was going to put another memory alongside that one and nothing was going to stop me.

After all, with my background — psychostatistics and espionage — what I had learned about this she-wolf only made me admire her more.

The Vernan-Rennian pact was signed by the Vernan Ambassador and myself for Verna, and the Rennian Premier and two others for Renn, less than six hours later.

But they were heavy going, those six hours.

At first I was under the naïve impression that, having caught Renn, official Renn, in double-dealing, intimidation, fraud, violation of privacy, and about a dozen other civil and international crimes, I was in a strong position and could more or less dictate terms. In fact, it was under this impression that I forced the discussion immediately.

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I soon found that the four Rennians (Vicky was there too) had entirely different ideas. I was the one who wanted an alliance, not they. I was the one who wanted it in a hurry. They would rather wait and see what Kolper had to say. Undoubtedly Kolper would make some sort of offer, given the chance. As for what had happened — surely I, most particularly, didn't want to go into that. There was still the matter of Fenner's murder hanging over me.

And I found myself surrendering point after point.

I never knew anyone like those Rennians in bargaining. Ravening wolves, they were, snapping up every scrap I dropped and forcing me back and back and back.

One thing was settled at that conference without a word being said about it: the Rennians were going to be worthwhile allies all right. Verna was going to be much better off with this cut-throat crew on her side than against her.

I didn't do too badly, really. Considering the opposition, I did as well as could have been expected, though later, when my report on the conference went in, my chief read it and said:

"Good God, Tony, why didn't you let him dance on your face too?"

"Well, the position I was in, sir . . ." I began.

"I see you didn't promise him Bluemist and Lobak as well as Verna. What went wrong? Didn't you think Renn would want them?"

"If you're going to be sarcastic, sir —"

"I am, Tony, I am! Here we've been chuckling gleefully and telling ourselves Verna always falls on her feet. And now we find we've fallen so hard it'll take us twenty years to dig ourselves out. . . . Tony, the Rennians may not have sold you Brooklyn Bridge, but they certainly got a down payment out of you!"

But this was only my chief, not the Rennians, so after twenty minutes of earnest talking I got him to agree that I'd done pretty well considering we had to have Renn, and that it could have been much, much worse. . . .

After the conference, with the pact signed and sealed and its terms on the way by subether radio to Verna, Vicky and I caught up with our eating.

During the conference we had made do with sandwiches and bottles of beer. Now that we were allies we went to one of the best restaurants in Jerris and dined in style.

The Rennians, Vicky included, were honest enough rogues, and I felt no rancor against them. The way they hammered out the terms of that pact made it clear enough they intended to keep it, and that was what mattered, after all.

I retrieved Vicky's car for her while she was dressing at her flat for dinner. I had hinted, since this was a special occasion, that she might forsake slacks for once.

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Perhaps she forgot. Perhaps there wasn't such a thing as a skirt in her wardrobe. She turned up in yet another of her pajama outfits. Still, no escort could object to taking out a girl dressed like that, if she was a girl like Vicky.

"You don't look like a she-wolf," I remarked, as we toyed with hors d'oeuvres.

She laughed, trying not to gloat, but failing.

Her black slacks did wonders for her length of leg, just-right hips and slender waist. A white, spangled, glittering bra top did nothing to spoil the effect. Her hair, her flashing teeth, her satiny skin made her something for a connoisseur.

Like me.

"Tell me," I said, "how did the Rennians, whom I almost wrote off as sheep in my survey, come to produce you and the Commissioner and the other three who've just been sucking my blood?"

"Your survey was right," she said, still smiling. "We *are* sheep, as a race. I don't know why, any more than you do. These things just happen — separate a people from its parent race and it begins to develop an individuality of its own. . . . Have you ever heard of Bertrand de Jouvenal?"

The abrupt question took me by surprise.

"No," I said. "Who was he?"

"An Earthman — long, long ago, before the first spaceship. He wrote one line that gives the key to the situation here, though he never dreamed of such a place as Renn. I saw it years ago, and thought how just it was. . . .

"*A society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves.*"

I smiled wryly. "I wish I'd known that before I came here. I'll put it in my list of psychostatistical maxims for the future."

Her smile was sympathetic. She felt she could afford to be sympathetic.

"It's been a seesaw," she said. "First we were up, with you not knowing what was going on. Then you found us out, and you were up. Then the conference, and we're up again."

"And now it's signed," I said pleasantly, "and I'm up."

"What are you getting at?" she demanded.

I didn't tell her then. In fact, I didn't tell her at all.

It was later, quite a lot later, when we were in her car, somewhere dark. In the Rennian code, apparently, a certain amount of consolation was accorded the losers. And it transpired that Vicky was a she-wolf in more ways than one. . . .

She had just been kissing me, and it says a lot for my presence of mind that I remembered when the late news came on and switched on the car radio.

Vicky was surprised at first, but not for long. The two main items were the Vernan-Rennian pact, and

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the other pact, the Florestán-Erith agreement, which had just been announced. . . .

She listened with mounting tension. Suddenly she leaned back fiercely against the side of the car, eyes sparking fiercely at me as they had done once before.

"You knew about this all the time — and never told us?" she demanded wrathfully.

I couldn't help laughing.

Neither, to do her justice, could she.

And she didn't draw back when I pulled her into my arms again.

"...nearly in the usual manner"

Account of the Gallo-American Fish Boats. Mr. Fulton [of steamboat fame] who introduced the Panorama at Paris, has lately made some experiments at Havre and Brest, with his Fish-boat. This boat is constructed nearly in the usual manner, only that the sides swell out more, and that the bottom is flat. The latter has an aperture in the middle for receiving a pump by means of which the vessel is made to descend to the bottom of the water. At one of the extremities there is another pump, by the help of which it ascends to the surface; and at the stern it is furnished with a rudder, by which it is steered when under the water. Over the boat, which it closes like a box, stands a kind of cone or dome, which serves as a hatchway for entering. This cone is constructed in the same manner as those lanthorns placed at the top of circular stairs in order to admit the light, and is furnished with several planes of glass, well cemented, and convey light to the interior of the boat, at the bottom of which is a glass that reflects the objects. By these means a person in the boat can see everything that passes over him. Mr. Fulton, in the course of his experiments, remained several hours under the water without the necessity of ascending to the surface. With this boat he can set fire to objects at a great distance, without being seen. To prove the possibility of producing this effect, fascines done over with pitch were fastened to the end of the Pier; the fish-boat then sunk down, and at the end of half an hour the fascines were observed to be in flames. Mr. Fulton suffers nobody to enter his boat but himself. He has invented also a kind of arrows or darts, which he can fix to any vessel that he intends to set on fire.

Temple of Reason, June 24, 1801.
(Contributed by Rita Gottesman)

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Agatha Christie, long a triumphant novelist, has now become, in her sixties, one of the most successful modern dramatists. Last December she set a new record as the first woman in history to have three plays running at once in London's West End; and one of those plays, WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION, *has been one of the smash hits of Broadway's 1954–55 season and will probably still be selling out regularly when this appears. Connoisseurs of Mrs. Christie's short stories are not too surprised; for more than twenty years they have known* WITNESS, *in its original short form, as one of the most powerful trick-plot tales ever devised. The story first appeared, peculiarly, as the one straight crime story in Christie's only volume of fantasies,* THE HOUND OF DEATH (*London: Odhams, 1933*)*; and to reverse the situation,* The Fourth Man, *from that same volume, was the only fantasy in the American collection of Christie crime stories entitled* THE WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (*Dodd, Mead, 1948*). *Here is fine vintage Christie, an eerie tale of multiple personality . . . or is it some even more disturbing psychic malady?*

The Fourth Man

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

CANON PARFITT PANTED A LITTLE. Running for trains was not much of a business for a man of his age. For one thing his figure was not what it was and with the loss of his slender silhouette went an increasing tendency to be short of breath. This tendency the Canon himself always referred to, with dignity, as "My heart, you know!"

He sank into the corner of the first-class carriage with a sigh of relief. The warmth of the heated carriage was most agreeable to him. Outside the snow was falling. Lucky to get a corner seat on a long night journey. Miserable business if you didn't. There ought to be a sleeper on this train.

The other three corners were already occupied, and noting this fact Canon Parfitt became aware that the man in the far corner was smiling at him in gentle recognition. He was a clean-shaven man with a quizzical face and hair just turning gray at

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the temples. His profession was so clearly the law that no one could have mistaken him for anything else for a moment. Sir George Durand was, indeed, a very famous lawyer.

"Well, Parfitt," he remarked genially, "you had a run for it, didn't you?"

"Very bad for my heart, I'm afraid," said the Canon. "Quite a coincidence meeting you, Sir George. Are you going far north?"

"Newcastle," said Sir George laconically. "By the way," he added, "do you know Dr. Campbell Clark?"

The man sitting on the same side of the carriage as the Canon inclined his head pleasantly.

"We met on the platform," continued the lawyer. "Another coincidence."

Canon Parfitt looked at Dr. Campbell Clark with a good deal of interest. It was a name of which he had often heard. Dr. Clark was in the forefront as a physician and mental specialist, and his last book, *The Problem of the Unconscious Mind*, had been the most discussed book of the year.

Cannon Parfitt saw a square jaw, very steady blue eyes, and reddish hair untouched by gray, but thinning rapidly. And he received also the impression of a very forceful personality.

By a perfectly natural association of ideas the Canon looked across to the seat opposite him, half-expecting to receive a glance of recognition there also, but the fourth occupant of the carriage proved to be a total stranger — a foreigner, the Canon fancied. He was a slight, dark man, rather insignificant in appearance. Hunched in a big overcoat, he appeared to be fast asleep.

"Canon Parfitt of Bradchester?" inquired Dr. Campbell Clark in a pleasant voice.

The Canon looked flattered. Those "scientific sermons" of his had really made a great hit — especially since the press had taken them up. Well, that was what the Church needed — good modern up-to-date stuff.

"I have read your book with great interest, Dr. Campbell Clark," he said. "Though it's a bit too technical here and there for me to follow."

Durand broke in.

"Are you for talking or sleeping, Canon?" he asked. "I'll confess at once that I suffer from insomnia and that therefore I'm in favor of the former."

"Oh, certainly! By all means," said the Canon. "I seldom sleep on these night journeys and the book I have with me is a very dull one."

"We are at any rate a representative gathering," remarked the doctor with a smile. "The Church, the law, the medical profession."

"Not much we couldn't give an opinion on between us, eh?" laughed Durand. "The Church for the spiritual view, myself for the purely worldly and legal view, and you, doctor, with the widest field of all,

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ranging from the purely pathological to the — super-psychological! Among the three of us we should cover any ground pretty completely, I fancy."

"Not so completely as you imagine, I think," said Dr. Clark. "There's another point of view, you know, that you left out, and that's rather an important one."

"Meaning?" queried the lawyer.

"The point of view of the man in the street."

"Is that so important? Isn't the man in the street usually wrong?"

"Oh, almost always! But he has the thing that all expert opinion must lack — the personal point of view. In the end, you know, you can't get away from personal relationships. I've found that in my profession. For every patient who comes to me genuinely ill, at least five come who have nothing whatever the matter with them except an inability to live happily with the inmates of the same house. They call it everything — from housemaid's knee to writer's cramp, but it's all the same thing, the raw surface produced by mind rubbing against mind."

"You have a lot of patients with 'nerves,' I suppose," the Canon remarked disparagingly. His own nerves were excellent.

"Ah, and what do you mean by that?" The other swung round on him, quick as a flash. "Nerves! People use that word and laugh after it, just as you did. 'Nothing the matter with so and so,' they say. 'Just nerves.' But, good God, man, you've got the crux of everything there! You can get at a mere bodily ailment and heal it. But at this day we know very little more about the obscure causes of the hundred and one forms of nervous disease than we did in — well, the reign of Queen Elizabeth!"

"Dear me," said Canon Parfitt, a little bewildered by this onslaught. "Is that so?"

"Mind you, it's a sign of grace," Dr. Campbell Clark went on. "In the old days we considered man a simple animal, body and soul — with stress laid on the former."

"Body, soul and spirit," corrected the clergyman mildly.

"Spirit?" The doctor smiled oddly. "What do you parsons mean exactly by spirit? You've never been very clear about it, you know. All down the ages you've funked an exact definition."

The Canon cleared his throat in preparation for speech, but to his chagrin he was given no opportunity. The doctor went on.

"Are we even sure the word is spirit — might it not be spirits?"

"Spirits?" Sir George Durand questioned, his eyebrows raised quizzically.

"Yes." Campbell Clark's gaze transferred itself to him. He leaned forward and tapped the other man lightly on the breast. "Are you so sure," he said gravely, "that there is only one occupant of this structure

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— for that is all it is, you know — this desirable residence to be let furnished — for seven, twenty-one, forty-one, seventy-one — whatever it may be! — years? And in the end the tenant moves his things out — little by little — and then goes out of the house altogether — and down comes the house, a mass of ruin and decay. You're the master of the house, we'll admit that, but aren't you ever conscious of the presence of others — soft-footed servants, hardly noticed, except for the work they do — work that you're not conscious of having done? Or friends — moods that take hold of you and make you, for the time being, a 'different man,' as the saying goes? You're the king of the castle, right enough, but be very sure the 'dirty rascal' is there too."

"My dear Clark," drawled the lawyer, "you make me positively uncomfortable. Is my mind really a battleground of conflicting personalities? Is that Science's latest?"

It was the doctor's turn to shrug his shoulders.

"Your body is," he said drily. "If the body, why not the mind?"

"Very interesting," said Canon Parfitt. "Ah! Wonderful science — wonderful science."

And inwardly he thought to himself: "I can get a most arresting sermon out of the idea."

But Dr. Campbell Clark had leaned back again in his seat, his momentary excitement spent.

"As a matter of fact," he remarked in a dry, professional manner, "it is a case of dual personality that takes me to Newcastle tonight. Very interesting case. Neurotic subject, of course. But quite genuine."

"Dual personality," said Sir George Durand thoughtfully. "It's not so very rare, I believe. There's loss of memory as well, isn't there? I know the matter cropped up in a case in the Probate Court the other day."

Dr. Clark nodded.

"The classic case, of course," he said, "was that of Félicie Bault. You may remember hearing of it?"

"Of course," said Canon Parfitt. "I remember reading about it in the papers — but quite a long time ago — seven years at least."

Dr. Campbell Clark nodded.

"That girl became one of the most famous figures in France. Scientists from all over the world came to see her. She had no less than four distinct personalities. They were known as Félicie 1, Félicie 2, Félicie 3, etc."

"Wasn't there some suggestion of deliberate trickery?" asked Sir George alertly.

"The personalities of Félicie 3 and Félicie 4 were a little open to doubt," admitted the doctor. "But the main facts remain. Félicie Bault was a Brittany peasant girl. She was the third of a family of five, the daughter of a drunken father and a mentally defective mother. In one of his drinking bouts the father strangled the mother and was, if I remember rightly, transported for life.

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Félicie was then five years of age. Some charitable people interested themselves in the children and Félicie was brought up and educated by an English maiden lady who had a kind of home for destitute children. She could make very little of Félicie, however. She describes the girl as abnormally slow and stupid, taught to read and write only with the greatest difficulty, and clumsy with her hands. This lady, Miss Slater, tried to fit the girl for domestic service, and did indeed find her several places when she was of an age to take them. But she never stayed long anywhere owing to her stupidity and also her intense laziness."

The doctor paused for a minute, and the Canon, recrossing his legs and arranging his traveling rug more closely round him, was suddenly aware that the man opposite him had moved very slightly. His eyes, which had formerly been shut, were now open, and something in them, something mocking and indefinable, startled the worthy Canon. It was as though the man were listening and gloating secretly over what he heard.

"There is a photograph taken of Félicie Bault at the age of seventeen," continued the doctor. "It shows her as a loutish peasant girl, heavy of build. There is nothing in that picture to indicate that she was soon to be one of the most famous persons in France.

"Five years later, when she was twenty-two, Félicie Bault had a severe nervous illness, and on recovery the strange phenomena began to manifest themselves. The following are facts attested to by many eminent scientists. The personality called Félicie 1 was indistinguishable from the Félicie Bault of the last twenty-two years. Félicie 1 wrote French badly and haltingly, spoke no foreign languages, and was unable to play the piano. Félicie 2, on the contrary, spoke Italian fluently and German moderately. Her handwriting was quite different from that of Félicie 1, and she wrote fluent and expressive French. She could discuss politics and art and she was passionately fond of playing the piano. Félicie 3 had many points in common with Félicie 2. She was intelligent and apparently well educated, but in moral character she was a total contrast. She appeared, in fact, an utterly depraved creature — but depraved in a Parisian and not a provincial way. She knew all the Paris *argot*, and the expressions of the chic demimonde. Her language was filthy and she would rail against religion and so-called 'good people' in the most blasphemous terms. Finally there was Félicie 4 — a dreamy, almost half-witted creature, distinctly pious and professedly clairvoyant, but this fourth personality was very unsatisfactory and elusive, and has been sometimes thought to be a deliberate trickery on the part of Félicie 3 — a kind of joke played by her on a credulous public. I may say that (with the possible exception of Félicie 4) each

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personality was distinct and separate and had no knowledge of the others. Félicie 2 was undoubtedly the most predominant and would last sometimes for a fortnight at a time, then Félicie 1 would appear abruptly for a day or two. After that, perhaps, Félicie 3 or 4, but the two latter seldom remained in command for more than a few hours. Each change was accompanied by severe headache and heavy sleep, and in each case there was complete loss of memory of the other states, the personality in question taking up life where she had left it, unconscious of the passage of time."

"Remarkable," murmured the Canon. "Very remarkable. As yet we know next to nothing of the marvels of the universe."

"We know that there are some very astute impostors in it," remarked the lawyer dryly.

"The case of Félicie Bault was investigated by lawyers as well as by doctors and scientists," said Dr. Campbell Clark quickly. "Maître Quimbellier, you remember, made the most thorough investigation and confirmed the views of the scientists. And after all, why should it surprise us so much? We come across the double-yolked egg, do we not? And the twin banana? Why not the double soul — or in this case the quadruple soul — in one body?"

"The double soul?" protested the Canon.

Dr. Campbell Clark turned his piercing blue eyes on him.

"What else can we call it? That is to say — if the personality is the soul?"

"It is a good thing such a state of affairs is only in the nature of a 'freak,' " remarked Sir George. "If the case were common, it would give rise to pretty complications."

"The condition is, of course, quite abnormal," agreed the doctor. "It was a great pity that a longer study could not have been made, but all that was put an end to by Félicie's unexpected death."

"There was something queer about that, if I remember rightly," said the lawyer slowly.

Dr. Campbell Clark nodded.

"A most unaccountable business. The girl was found one morning dead in bed. She had clearly been strangled. But to everyone's stupefaction it was presently proved beyond doubt that she had actually strangled herself. The marks on her neck were those of her own fingers. A method of suicide which, though not physically impossible, must have necessitated terrific muscular strength and almost superhuman will power. What had driven the girl to such straits has never been found out. Of course her mental balance must always have been precarious. Still, there it is. The curtain has been rung down forever on the mystery of Félicie Bault."

It was then that the man in the far corner laughed.

The other three men jumped as though shot. They had totally for-

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gotten the existence of the fourth among them. As they stared towards the place where he sat, still hunched in his overcoat, he laughed again.

"You must excuse me, gentlemen," he said, in perfect English that had, nevertheless, a foreign flavor.

He sat up, displaying a pale face with a small jet-black mustache.

"Yes, you must excuse me," he said, with a mock bow. "But really! In science, is the last word ever said?"

"You know something of the case we have been discussing?" asked the doctor courteously.

"Of the case? No. But I knew her."

"Félicie Bault?"

"Yes. And Annette Ravel also. You have not heard of Annette Ravel, I see? And yet the story of the one is the story of the other. Believe me, you know nothing of Félicie Bault if you do not also know the history of Annette Ravel."

He drew out a watch and looked at it.

"Just half an hour before the next stop. I have time to tell you the story — that is, if you care to hear it?"

"Please tell it to us," said the doctor quietly.

"Delighted," said the Canon. "Delighted."

Sir George Durand merely composed himself in an attitude of keen attention.

"My name, gentlemen," began their strange traveling companion, "is Raoul Letardeau. You have spoken just now of an English lady, Miss Slater, who interested herself in works of charity. I was born in that Brittany fishing village and when my parents were both killed in a railway accident it was Miss Slater who came to the rescue and saved me from the equivalent of your English workhouse. There were some twenty children under her care, girls and boys. Among these children were Félicie Bault and Annette Ravel. If I cannot make you understand the personality of Annette, gentlemen, you will understand nothing. She was the child of what you call a *fille de joie* who had died of consumption, abandoned by her lover. The mother had been a dancer, and Annette, too, had the desire to dance. When I saw her first she was eleven years old, a little shrimp of a thing with eyes that alternately mocked and promised — a little creature all fire and life. And at once — yes, at once — she made me her slave. It was 'Raoul, do this for me,' 'Raoul, do that for me.' And me, I obeyed. Already I worshipped her, and she knew it.

"We would go down to the shore together, we three — for Félicie would come with us. And there Annette would pull off her shoes and stockings and dance on the sand. And then when she sank down breathless, she would tell us of what she meant to do and be.

" 'See you, I shall be famous.

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Yes, exceedingly famous. I will have hundreds and thousands of silk stockings — the finest silk. And I shall live in an exquisite apartment. All my lovers shall be young and handsome as well as being rich. And when I dance, all Paris shall come to see me. They will yell and call and shout and go mad over my dancing. And in the winters I shall not dance. I shall go south to the sunlight. There are villas there with orange trees. I shall have one of them. I shall lie in the sun on silk cushions, eating oranges. As for you, Raoul, I will never forget you, however great and rich and famous I shall be. I will protect you and advance your career. Félicie here shall be my maid — no, her hands are too clumsy. Look at them, how large and coarse they are.'

"Félicie would grow angry at that. And then Annette would go on teasing her.

" 'She is so ladylike, Félicie — so elegant, so refined. She is a princess in disguise — ha, ha.'

" 'My father and mother were married, which is more than yours were,' Félicie would growl out spitefully.

" 'Yes, and your father killed your mother. A pretty thing, to be a murderer's daughter.'

" 'Your father left your mother to rot,' Félicie would rejoin.

" 'Ah! yes.' Annette became thoughtful. '*Pauvre Maman.* One must keep strong and well. It is everything to keep strong and well.'

" 'I am as strong as a horse,' Félicie boasted.

"And indeed she was. She had twice the strength of any other girl in the Home. And she was never ill.

"But she was stupid, you comprehend, stupid like a brute beast. I often wondered why she followed Annette round as she did. It was, with her, a kind of fascination. Sometimes, I think, she actually hated Annette, and indeed Annette was not kind to her. She jeered at her slowness and stupidity, and baited her in front of the others. I have seen Félicie grow quite white with rage. Sometimes I have thought that she would fasten her fingers round Annette's neck and choke the life out of her. She was not nimble-witted enough to reply to Annette's taunts, but she did learn in time to make one retort which never failed. That was the reference to her own health and strength. She had learned (what I had always known) that Annette envied her her strong physique, and she struck instinctively at the weak spot in her enemy's armor.

"One day Annette came to me in great glee.

" 'Raoul,' she said, 'we shall have fun today with that stupid Félicie.'

" 'What are you going to do?'

" 'Come behind the little shed and I will tell you.'

"It seemed that Annette had got hold of some book. Part of it she did not understand, and indeed the whole thing was much over her head.

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It was an early work on hypnotism.

" 'A bright object, they say. The brass knob of my bed, it twirls round. I made Félicie look at it last night. "Look at it steadily," I said. "Do not take your eyes off it." And then I twirled it. Raoul, I was frightened. Her eyes looked so queer — so queer. "Félicie, you will do what I say always," I said. "I will do what you say always, Annette," she answered. And then — and then — I said: "Tomorrow you will bring a tallow candle out into the playground at 12 o'clock and start to eat it. And if anyone asks you, you will say that it is the best *galette* you ever tasted." Oh! Raoul, think of it!'

" 'But she'll never do such a thing,' I objected.

" 'The book says so. Not that I can quite believe it — but, oh! Raoul, if the book is all true, how we shall amuse ourselves!'

"I, too, thought the idea very funny. We passed word round to the comrades and at 12 o'clock we were all in the playground. Punctual to the minute, out came Félicie with a stump of candle in her hand. Will you believe me, Messieurs, she began solemnly to nibble at it. We were all in hysterics! Every now and then one or another of the children would go up to her and say solemnly: 'It is good, what you eat there, eh, Félicie?' And she would answer. 'But, yes, it is the best *galette* I ever tasted.' And then we would shriek with laughter. We laughed at last so loud that the noise seemed to wake up Félicie to a realization of what she was doing. She blinked her eyes in a puzzled way, looked at the candle, then at us. She passed her hand over her forehead.

" 'But what is it that I do here?' she muttered.

" 'You are eating a candle,' we screamed.

" '*I* made you do it. *I* made you do it,' cried Annette, dancing about.

"Félicie stared for a moment. Then she went slowly up to Annette.

" 'So it is you — it is you who have made me ridiculous? I seem to remember. Ah! I will kill you for this.'

"She spoke in a very quiet tone, but Annette rushed suddenly away and hid behind me.

" 'Save me, Raoul! I am afraid of Félicie. It was only a joke, Félicie. Only a joke.'

" 'I do not like these jokes,' said Félicie. 'You understand? I hate you. I hate you all.'

"She suddenly burst out crying and rushed away.

"Annette was, I think, scared by the result of her experiment, and did not try to repeat it. But from that day on her ascendency over Félicie seemed to grow stronger.

"Félicie, I now believe, always hated her, but nevertheless she could not keep away from her. She used to follow Annette around like a dog.

"Soon after that, Messieurs, employment was found for me, and I only came to the Home for occasional holidays. Annette's desire to

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become a dancer was not taken seriously, but she developed a very pretty singing voice as she grew older and Miss Slater consented to her being trained as a singer.

"She was not lazy, Annette. She worked feverishly, without rest. Miss Slater was obliged to prevent her doing too much. She spoke to me once about her.

" 'You have always been fond of Annette,' she said. 'Persuade her not to work too hard. She has a little cough lately that I do not like.'

"My work took me afar afield soon afterwards. I received one or two letters from Annette at first, but then came silence. For five years after that I was abroad.

"Quite by chance, when I returned to Paris, my attention was caught by a poster advertising Annette Ravelli with a picture of the lady. I recognized her at once. That night I went to the theatre in question. Annette sang in French and Italian. On the stage she was wonderful. Afterwards I went to her dressing room. She received me at once.

" 'Why, Raoul,' she cried, stretching out her whitened hands to me. 'This is splendid! Where have you been all these years?'

"I would have told her, but she did not really want to listen.

" 'You see, I have nearly arrived!'

"She waved a triumphant hand round the room filled with bouquets.

" 'The good Miss Slater must be proud of your success.'

" 'That old one? No, indeed. She designed me, you know, for the Conservatoire. Decorous concert singing. But me, I am an artist. It is here, on the variety stage, that I can express myself.'

"Just then a handsome middle-aged man came in. He was very distinguished. By his manner I soon saw that he was Annette's protector. He looked sideways at me, and Annette explained.

" 'A friend of my infancy. He passes through Paris, sees my picture on a poster, *et voilà!*'

"The man was then very affable and courteous. In my presence he produced a ruby and diamond bracelet and clasped it on Annette's wrist. As I rose to go, she threw me a glance of triumph and a whisper.

" 'I arrive, do I not? You see? All the world is before me.'

"But as I left the room, I heard her cough, a sharp dry cough. I knew what it meant, that cough. It was the legacy of her mother.

"I saw her next two years later. She had gone for refuge to Miss Slater. Her career had broken down. She was in a state of advanced consumption for which the doctors said nothing could be done.

"Ah! I shall never forget her as I saw her then! She was lying in a kind of shelter in the garden. She was kept outdoors night and day. Her cheeks were hollow and flushed, her eyes bright and feverish.

"She greeted me with a kind of desperation that startled me.

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" 'It is good to see you, Raoul. You know what they say — that I may not get well? They say it behind my back, you understand. To me they are soothing and consolatory. But it is not true, Raoul, it is not true! I shall not permit myself to die. Die? With beautiful life stretching in front of me? It is the will to live that matters. All the great doctors say that nowadays. I am not one of the feeble ones who let go. Already I feel myself infinitely better — infinitely better, do you hear?'

"She raised herself on her elbow to drive her words home, then fell back, attacked by a fit of coughing that racked her thin body.

" 'The cough — it is nothing,' she gasped. 'And hemorrhages do not frighten me. I shall surprise the doctors. It is the will that counts. Remember, Raoul, I am going to live.'

"It was pitiful, you understand, pitiful.

"Just then, Félicie Bault came out with a tray. A glass of hot milk. She gave it to Annette and watched her drink it with an expression that I could not fathom. There was a kind of smug satisfaction in it.

"Annette, too, caught the look. She flung the glass down angrily, so that it smashed to bits.

" 'You see her? That is how she always looks at me. She is glad I am going to die! Yes, she gloats over it. She who is well and strong. Look at her — never a day's illness, that one! And all for nothing. What good is that great carcass of hers to her? What can she make of it?'

"Félicie stooped and picked up the broken fragments of glass.

" 'I do not mind what she says,' she observed in a singsong voice. 'What does it matter? I am a respectable girl, I am. As for her, she will be knowing the fires of Purgatory before very long. I am a Christian. I say nothing.'

" 'You hate me!' cried Annette. 'You have always hated me. Ah! but I can charm you, all the same. I can make you do what I want. See now, if I asked you to, you would go down on your knees before me now on the grass.'

" 'You are absurd,' said Félicie uneasily.

" 'But, yes, you will do it. You will. To please me. Down on your knees. I ask it of you, I, Annette. Down on your knees, Félicie.'

"Whether it was the wonderful pleading in the voice, or some deeper motive, Félicie obeyed. She sank slowly on to her knees, her arms spread wide, her face vacant and stupid.

"Annette flung back her head and laughed — peal upon peal of laughter.

" 'Look at her, with her stupid face! How ridiculous she looks. You can get up now, Félicie, thank you! It is of no use to scowl at me. I am your mistress. You have to do what I say.'

"She lay back on her pillows exhausted. Félicie picked up the tray

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and moved slowly away. Once she looked back over her shoulder, and the smoldering resentment in her eyes startled me.

"I was not there when Annette died. But it was terrible, it seems. She clung to life. She fought against death like a madwoman. Again and again she gasped out: 'I will not die — do you hear me? I will not die. I will live — live —'

"Miss Slater told me all this when I came to see her six months later.

" 'My poor Raoul,' she said kindly. 'You loved her, did you not?'

" 'Always — always. But of what use could I be to her? Let us not talk of it. She is dead — she so brilliant, so full of burning life . . .'

"Miss Slater was a sympathetic woman. She went on to talk of other things. She was very worried about Félicie, so she told me. The girl had had a queer sort of nervous breakdown and ever since she had been very strange in manner.

" 'You know,' said Miss Slater, after a momentary hesitation, 'that she is learning the piano?'

"I did not know it and was very much surprised to hear it. Félicie — learning the piano! I would have declared the girl would not know one note from another.

" 'She has talent, they say,' continued Miss Slater. 'I can't understand it. I have always put her down as — well, Raoul, you know yourself, she was always a stupid girl.'

"I nodded.

" 'She is so strange in her manner I don't know what to make of it.'

"A few minutes later I entered the Salle de Lecture. Félicie was playing the piano. She was playing the air that I had heard Annette sing in Paris. You understand, Messieurs, it gave me quite a turn. And then, hearing me, she broke off suddenly and looked round at me, her eyes full of mockery and intelligence. For a moment I thought — Well, I will not tell you what I thought.

" '*Tiens!*' she said. 'So it is you — Monsieur Raoul.'

"I cannot describe the way she said it. To Annette I had never ceased to be Raoul. But Félicie, since we had met as grown-ups, always addressed me as Monsieur Raoul. But the way she said now was different — as though the *Monsieur*, slightly stressed, was somehow amusing.

" 'Why, Félicie,' I stammered, 'you look quite different today?"

" 'Do I?' she said reflectively. 'It is odd, that. But do not be so solemn, Raoul — decidedly I shall call you Raoul — did we not play together as children? — Life was made for laughter. Let us talk of the poor Annette — she who is dead and buried. Is she in Purgatory, I wonder, or where?'

"And she hummed a snatch of song — untunefully enough, but the words caught my attention.

" 'Félicie!' I cried. 'You speak Italian?'

" 'Why not, Raoul? I am not as

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stupid as I pretend to be, perhaps.' She laughed at my mystification.

" 'I don't understand —' I began.

" 'But I will tell you. I am a very fine actress, though no one suspects it. I can play many parts — and play them very well.'

"She laughed again and ran quickly out of the room before I could stop her.

"I saw her again before I left. She was asleep in an armchair. She was snoring heavily. I stood and watched her, fascinated, yet repelled. Suddenly she woke with a start. Her eyes, dull and lifeless, met mine.

" 'Monsieur Raoul,' she muttered.

" 'Yes, Félicie. I am going now. Will you play for me again before I go?'

" 'I? Play? You are laughing at me, Monsieur Raoul.'

" 'Don't you remember playing for me this morning?'

"She shook her head.

" 'I play? How can a poor girl like me play?'

"She paused for a minute as though in thought, then beckoned me nearer.

" 'Monsieur Raoul, there are things going on in this house! They play tricks upon you. They alter the clocks. Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. And it is all her doing.'

" 'Whose doing?' I asked, startled.

" 'That Annette's. That wicked one's. When she was alive she always tormented me. Now that she is dead, she comes back from the dead to torment me.'

"I stared at Félicie. I could see now that she was in an extremity of terror, her eyes starting from her head.

" 'She is bad, that one. She is bad, I tell you. She would take the bread from your mouth, the clothes from your back, the soul from your body. . . .'

"She clutched me suddenly.

" 'I am afraid, I tell you — afraid. I hear her voice — not in my ear — no, not in my ear. Here, in my head —' She tapped her forehead. 'She will drive me away — drive me away altogether, and then what shall I do, what will become of me?'

"Her voice rose almost to a shriek. She had in her eyes the look of the terrified beast at bay. . . .

"Suddenly she smiled, a pleasant smile, full of cunning, with something in it that made me shiver.

" 'If it should come to it, Monsier Raoul, I am very strong with my hands — very strong with my hands.'

"I had never noticed her hands particularly before. I looked at them now and shuddered in spite of myself. Squat brutal fingers, and as Félicie had said, terribly strong. . . . I can't explain to you the nausea that swept over me. With hands such as these her father must have strangled her mother. . . .

"That was the last time I ever saw Félicie Bault. Immediately afterwards I went abroad — to South America. I returned from there two

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years after her death. Something I had read in the newspapers of her life and sudden death. I have heard fuller details tonight — from you. Félicie 3 and Félicie 4 — I wonder? She was a good actress, you know!"

The train suddenly slackened speed. The man in the corner sat erect and buttoned his overcoat more closely.

"What is your theory?" asked the lawyer, leaning forward.

"I can hardly believe —" began Cannon Parfitt, and stopped.

The doctor said nothing. He was gazing steadily at Raoul Letardeau.

" 'The clothes from your back, the soul from your body,' " quoted the Frenchman lightly. He stood up. "I say to you, Messieurs, that the history of Félicie Bault is the history of Annette Ravel. You did not know her, gentlemen. I did. She was very fond of life. . . ."

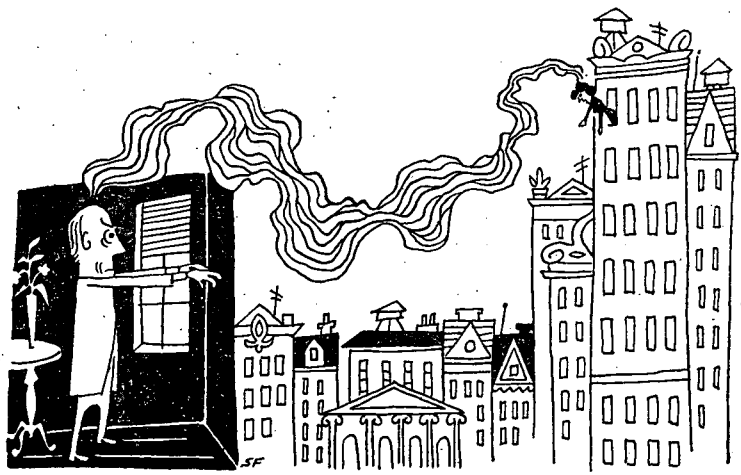
His hand on the door, ready to spring out, he turned suddenly and bending down tapped Canon Parfitt on the chest.

"M. le docteur over there, he said just now that all this" — his hand smote the Canon's stomach, and the Canon winced — "was only a residence. Tell me, if you find a burglar in your house what do you do? Shoot him, do you not?"

"No," cried the Canon. "No, indeed — I mean — not in this country."

But he spoke the last words to empty air. The carriage door banged loudly.

The clergyman, the lawyer, and the doctor were alone. The fourth corner was vacant.



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With this issue F&SF inaugurates a new service to its readers: a complete coverage, as up-to-the-minute as printers' deadlines allow, of current science fiction and fantasy films, by a writer who knows both Hollywood and s.f. intimately:

The Science Screen

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

WHEN AN IRATE MOVIE PRODUCER once asked the late Harold Ross why a 23-year-old writer had been put in charge of *The New Yorker*'s Current Cinema department, Ross answered in his usual laconic fashion. "Good God," he said, "you don't think I'd send out a full-grown man, do you?"

The remark reflected perfectly the attitude of one magazine toward all films, but serves equally well, I think, to illustrate one of the two trends presently dominating science fiction and fantasy film criticism. Patronization is too mild a word for it. The fact is that nowadays non-specialist reviewers regard s.f. *solely* as a springboard for eloquent pun-making. To consider such films adult entertainment would be unthinkable; furthermore, look at all the fun it would spoil!

It's a regrettable trend, certainly, but the other — which holds that we are in the Golden Age of movies, and greets each new ROBOT MONSTER with fierce joy and tearful gratitude — is worse. This is the "Well, the story was terrible, and there weren't any real people in it, but wow! What a swell rocket takeoff!" school. It forgives all. Nothing daunts or deflects it.

Both are wrong. If it is true that out of the deluge of mediocrity there is still a steady trickle of worthwhile films, it is also true that conditions are far from satisfactory. Granted we have at least enough to support continuing interest, it seems to me that a realistic appraisal could do no harm.

Golden Ages are, I realize, always in the past: They never do things like they used to, Back in the Good Old Days. Still, in the case of science fiction and fantasy pictures, it's so. The Golden Age — by which is meant the considerable time between 1925 and 1950 when s.f. was not consciously a genre; when the term itself was unknown to its finest

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practitioners — *is* past. Whether gone, only time can tell, but past it is, surviving now in a few scattered museums and third-rate theaters and in the studio crypts. Those of the youngest generation, weaned on ROCKETSHIP XM and WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE, know not of this age, nor of its pleasures. They are denied the thrill of looking forward to the latest Val Lewton (if, indeed, they have even heard the name of that much-lamented and irreplaceable master of cinematic suspense); of wondering what grisly retribution will overtake Karloff in his new one; of seeing such genuinely fine pictures as THE MAN WHO COULD WORK MIRACLES and KING KONG for the *first* time. Only yellowing stills are left to remind them of our vanished glories: THE ISLAND OF LOST SOULS, THE INVISIBLE MAN, METROPOLIS, DEAD OF NIGHT, FRANKENSTEIN, THE CAT PEOPLE, THE BODY SNATCHER, THINGS TO COME, and a host of other near-master-pieces. But apart from the actual titles, the greatest lack today, I feel — something little understood by the young, unless they live in metropolitan areas and search the papers scrupulously for revivals — is the quality of honest labor, of hand-workmanship, that marked the early productions. It's an indefinable sort of ingredient, like the *gemütlichkeit* of certain old restaurants and cities, but not so personal as it might appear: one had only to see ALL THAT MONEY CAN BUY again to verify its existence. This year the superlative 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA had it, and before that the modestly produced THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL. But it is an increasingly rare thing to encounter.

Yet, even so, conditions are not as bad as the battalion of sour enthusiasts would have us believe. No age that gives us Disney's *chef-d'œuvre* is entirely Dark. And the gold is still there, Lord knows; all we need is a better method of extracting it — or, perhaps, a return to old methods. The correction of a single mistake, for example — Hollywood's mad insistence upon hiring writers who know nothing about s.f., and care for it less, to write s.f. — might do wonders toward bringing about a renascence. And the understanding that the public is not, after all, comprised wholly of hare-brains who must be pandered to, would do the same.

Meanwhile, I think we ought to exercise patience; be grumpy and dissatisfied at the thought of what could be, critical but thankful for what is.

What is isn't very much this time, I fear. THIS ISLAND EARTH (Universal-International) has the same wacky, innocent charm of the early Flash Gordon serials when it is at its best; but its best lasts only a few minutes. For the rest of the time, it ranges from bad to incredible. Franklin Coen, who ended up with final screenplay credit, is principally to blame, though the pro-

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ducer, William Alland, must share a good portion of the guilt. Together, they have managed to turn a moderately engaging novel by Raymond F. Jones into a sub-juvenile romp. The story, as it appears on the screen, fails completely to fulfill its early promise. Cal Meacham, an electronics expert, receives something called an 'interocitor' in the mail; then he receives a catalogue listing hundreds of similarly strange gadgets, all unknown to him. He orders the works, puts it together according to a plan (in the book he had no such easy guide), and finds himself qualified to assist a group of aliens in their death struggle with a neighboring planet. As the electronics whiz, Rex Reason (not to be confused with Tab Hunter, Race Gentry, Rock Hudson, or Rick Jason) performs with the easy grace of a Bantu shaman at an appendectomy. Faith Domergue is equally improbable in her role, but here it is somehow easier to bear. As Exeter, the Metalunian foreman, Jeff Morrow grapples manfully with some of the nastiest dialogue any actor has ever had to mouth and succeeds in bringing quiet dignity to a role that doesn't deserve it. It is true that he follows the tradition of pronouncing the word *mutant* in such a manner that one thinks of laryngitic emmets, but this is a small flaw in an otherwise laudable performance. (The mutant in question, by the way, plumbs a new depth in movie monsters; it is about as fearful as a fox terrier.) The spaceship is unconvincing and altogether too much like a Thrifty drugstore, but the special effect work elsewhere is decidedly above par. The artists' conception of the planet Metaluna leaves little to be desired: it is satisfyingly outré, yet believable. Run without sound, the picture might be worth seeing.

No such happy moments save CONQUEST OF SPACE (Paramount). Here is certainly the disappointment of the year, if not of all time; by all odds one of the worst science fiction movies ever made. With a fine book (by Willy Ley and Chesley Bonestell) as his nominal base, and with a stable of top-notch writers — James O'Hanlon, Barré Lyndon, George Worthington Yates, and Oscar-winner Phillip Yordan — assigned to the screenplay, George Pal has done science fiction its greatest disservice since ABBOTT AND COSTELLO GO TO MARS. At least that picture was honest. CONQUEST OF SPACE is not. It is mendacious, pompous, packed to bursting with all the clichés that ever were or ever will be, and utterly tasteless. What plot there is, is negligible. The special effects are uniformly poor, however correct they may be from a technical standpoint. At no time is a scene built up or handled with even the minimal skill one would expect from a Katzman quickie — let alone from the men who produced DESTINATION MOON. Bang! We're on the space platform. Pow! We're on Mars! Boom! Off again. The end.

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The crew-members of the first ship to reach Mars are supposed to have been hand-picked for their superior abilities. In view of the results of the final culling, one hates to think of those who washed out. We have a religious fanatic for a captain, his homesick son, a Japanese patriot and horticulturist, an Irish stowaway, a fey Viennese, and the inevitable Brooklynite — without whom, it seems, no space journey is possible. The last named is "comic relief" and a more grimly embarrassing character has yet to be seen on film. He grunts like an ape, makes faces, and floats out of his shoes (in direct violation of the captain's sensible order forbidding "unnecessary floating"). When he is instructed to make some repairs, he must be reassured that he won't be blown off the ship; yet, of course, he is another electronics wizard! The captain, though, is really enough to turn your hair white. Chosen as the man best equipped to command the Mars expedition, he spends most of his time raving endless gibberish about God's Never Having Meant Man to Venture Forth into the Unknown. Eventually he all but wrecks the ship, and we are profoundly relieved when his son shoots him. The remaining crew-members make speeches, water flowers, search for the Great Allegory of Space, and quarrel. Their only virtue is that of imperturbability; nothing awes these geniuses, or depresses them. Reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's comment that he found the Atlantic ocean "a great disappointment" is the Brooklynite Sgt. Siegal's opinion of Mars: "[It's a] dried-up ball of nothin' in the corner pocket of nowhere." With just one of these fellows aboard, the *Nautilus* would still be under water. Where this picture ought to be.

CULT OF THE COBRA (Universal-International) is, on the other hand, a rather pleasant surprise. A supernatural-suspense job, it attempts to recapture the old Val Lewton flavor, and though it fails, does manage to generate some real mood and excitement. The writers tried, clearly, and are to be commended; their only sin is that of dullness. In this, however, they sin excessively, and the whole thing becomes a terrible bore from the middle-mark on. Francis Lyon's direction is frequently imaginative — there are quite effective shots of screaming cats and frightened horses, excellent handling of a scene in a deserted bowling alley — but the U-I contract actors have just been washed and Lyon can't do a thing with them.

The basic story, which concerns a Lamian weresnake's revenge upon six ex-GI temple-desecraters, is whiskery *Weird Tales* stuff, circa 1930. Silly, but no sillier than THE CAT PEOPLE, and what a picture *that* was!

Progress Report (a department devoted to news of films *definitely* in production, or approaching that stage): Jack Finney's THE BODY SNATCHERS is edging toward com-

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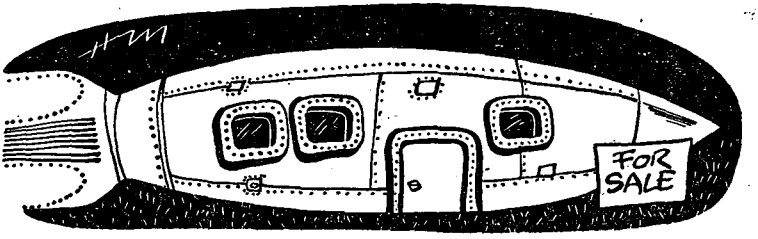
pletion and should be ready for review by November. This is not a remake of Val Lewton's classic, THE BODY SNATCHER, incidentally, and does not concern the Burke and Hare case. A title-change seems probable. . . . Veteran fantasy writer Cyril Hume has done the finished script on FORBIDDEN PLANET, which M-G-M advertises, with characteristic modesty, as "the science fiction picture that takes up where the others left off!" The question is, *which* others? . . . From France comes the welcome news that John Collier is adapting three of his short stories for a feature-length production. . . . And various independent studios are soon to bless us with IT CAME FROM THE OCEAN FLOOR, THE CREATURE WITH THE ATOM BRAIN, TARANTULA, and THE BEAST WITH 1,000,000 (*count 'em, 1,000,000!*) EYES.

(*Unless Hollywood's rate of s.f. production steps up to justify greater frequency, Mr. Beaumont's column will appear here quarterly. Watch for his next survey in our December issue!*)



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The first Idris Seabright story was The Listening Child *(F&SF, December, 1950); but since that sensitive tale of childhood — which I confess still haunts me after five years — she has confined herself to the problems of adults, of this and assorted other races of beings. Now she returns to the perplexities of youth; surely no girl ever faced such a terrifying dilemma of dual evil as Babs Hoffmeier . . . or escaped so happily.*

Personal Monster

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

THE THING IN THE ASH PIT WAS, TO Babs Hoffmeier, an agonizing disgrace. More than anything else in the world, she wanted to keep its existence concealed from her mother and her dad. But the need for secrecy did not apply to other children. She could show the thing to them. She took Neenie around behind the house, back in the bushes where the old ash pit was, without shame.

Neenie climbed up on the fence Mr. Hoffmeier had built around the pit, and looked down at the monster. She was a little afraid, but not much. With the candid selfishness of childhood, she recognized that the thing in the ash pit was Babs's problem exclusively. Provided she stayed away from direct physical contact with it, it wouldn't hurt *her*.

"How're you gonna feed it while you're at camp?" she asked, teetering precariously. "Two whole weeks?"

Babs shook her head. "I don' know. And if I don' feed it, mom and dad will find out I've got it, for sure. If it gets hungry. Maybe I could feed it a lot just before I go. . . . But I'm scared."

"It sure is a mean-looking old thing," Neenie replied obliquely. "It looks like the head off a great big baby. Or like a great big, big eye. How does it eat, anyhow?"

"You want to watch?" Babs said. "It's kind of funny."

She opened the package of stew meat — she had bought it with the last of her allowance — and picked up a red, flabby chunk. She clambered up on the fence beside Neenie, and leaned out over it. Daintily she dropped the cube of meat on the monster's thin-skinned pink upper surface.

It is impossible to say what did happen to the meat. The pink membrane did not appear to fold up

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around it, or to open to take it in. The meat was gone, that was all, as soon as it touched the membrane. There wasn't even a lump to show where it had been.

"Jeepers!" Neenie said. "That was as quick as — as wet the bed!" She giggled rather nervously.

"Um-hum. I bet it could eat up a whole chicken — a whole turkey, even — and not show it. It could eat it up right at once."

By common consent they got down from the fence and seated themselves on the dusty ground a few yards away from the ash pit, in the shade of the shrubbery. "Where'd it come from?" Neenie asked.

"Up there." Babs pointed to a part of the sky in which, if it had been dark, Arcturus would have been visible. "It told me so."

"Oh. Like a comic book." Neenie didn't care for comic books. She lost interest perceptibly.

"How'd you get it, though?" she asked after a moment.

"I . . . I came out to the ash pit one evening, and there it was, just the way it is now. It told me — it can tell you things inside your head, without talking — it told me I'd have to take care of it. Or it would tell mother and dad. Back where it comes from, people like me — little girls — have to take care of it. Some of the grown-ups make them."

"Yeah, but . . ." Something in Babs' demeanor aroused Neenie's curiosity. She said, "Why'd it come to you, though? There are lots and lots of little girls."

Babs turned her face away. One brown pigtail hung down between her and Neenie. She said, very quickly, "I broke the cut glass vase mother said she got at her wedding. An' I threw the pieces out here, in the ash pit, because nobody puts ashes in it any more or comes here. An' when mother said I must have broke it, I said I hadn't. She switched me to make me tell, and I still wouldn't. An' daddy said he'd slap my face if I was lying. So I said I wasn't. An' then they both said they didn't know *what* could have happened to that vase."

There was a silence. Neenie broke off a sprig of privet and chewed on it absently. Then she said, "Maybe they had it come to you. Like Santa Claus, I mean. Only the other way round. Because you were bad."

"Unh-unh." Babs was positive. "They wouldn' do a thing like that. Mother'd switch me and dad would slap me. But they wouldn' make me have a thing like *that*."

"You're 'dopted," Neenie said doubtfully.

"Oh, sure, I'm 'dopted," Babs answered with a touch of hauteur. "But that doesn't make any difference. They just *wouldn't*."

Neenie chewed some more on her privet sprig. "Maybe you ought to tell them," she said slowly. "Tell them about how that old thing came and you have to take care of it.

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Maybe they could think up a way to get rid of it."

Babs' face puckered up. "I can't. I just can't. I don't want them to know. Having that old thing makes me feel so bad!" She had begun to cry.

"Lying about that glass vase you broke must have been awful bad to make you get a mean big thing like that," Neenie said virtuously.

Babs stopped crying. She raised her face and looked at Neenie. "Big deal!" she said spitefully. "Big schlemiel! I guess we can't all be as good as you are."

Neenie sniffed. "I haven' got a thing in an ash pit to take care of. *Anyway.*"

"You will have," Babs said dangerously. She leaned forward. "You and everybody else. *All* the other little girls will. One of these days."

Neenie sat very still. Her little brown face looked pinched and frightened. "How do you know that?" she asked in a wobbling voice.

"It told me," Babs answered positively. "It's going to have babies, a lot of babies, mighty soon. Hundreds and hundreds of them. And then all the little girls will have things to take care of. Just like mine. You too. Everybody will."

Neenie sat quiet a minute longer. Then she got up, brushing dust from the skirt of her faded-blue denim dress. "I have to go home now," she said. She walked rapidly toward the front of the Hoffmeier house. When she was almost at the kitchen windows she began to run.

Babs looked after her with spiteful satisfaction. But when Neenie was out of sight her face grew worried again. She'd be leaving for girl scout camp in four days. Her allowance was all spent; there was less than a dollar in her piggy bank. What was she going to do?

Albert Pike jumped out of the box car a little before the freight train drew into the station. He was wearing a pair of painters' overalls, a cloth jacket, and a pair of shoes. Nothing else at all. In one pocket he had a can of lye and in the other a knife. The lye and the knife stood for the same thing in his mind — a particular kind of power. They were both nice things to have.

He made a wide detour around the station. A block and a half up the street from it there was a small, clean restaurant. He went in and ordered coffee and apple pie. The waitress thought he was an awfully nice-looking old man.

When he had finished his lunch he walked along the street slowly until he saw a flash of greenery ahead. His face brightened. It was a park, and where there was a park there was pretty sure to be a playground. A playground meant children. Albert Pike liked children *very* much.

Babs woke on Tuesday morning feeling sick with anxiety. She was

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to go to camp tomorrow; she had shaken the last penny out of her piggy bank; she hadn't any idea how she could keep the monster in the ash pit quiet for fourteen days.

For a moment she experimented hopefully with the idea of being *really* sick, too sick to go to camp. But her mother was never sympathetic toward physical illness. If she thought Babs was ailing she'd probably send her off to camp a day early, on the theory that fresh air and exercise would be the best treatment for her. And if she discovered that Babs was only playing sick she'd switch her legs good and hard. No, being sick wouldn't help.

After breakfast Babs went out to the garage and scrabbled around, trying to find something she could get the deposit back on at the store. Two dusty Pepsi-Cola bottles were the only refundable objects she could locate. Behind them, in a corner of the garage with a tarpaulin thrown over it, she found something that puzzled her considerably.

It was a heap of curving, silvery pieces of very heavy metal. It looked as if the pieces fitted together to make something shaped like an egg, but they were so heavy that Babs couldn't try them around and be sure.

She puzzled over the pieces for quite a long time, glad to have something to think about besides the thing in the ash pit. They looked as if they might be worth something, but they were too heavy for her to load in her wagon and take to the junk yard. Where had they come from? She was almost positive they hadn't been there the last time she had looked in the garage.

A little before noon she took the two Pepsi-Cola bottles to the grocery. She got four cents for them.

By 3 o'clock in the afternoon she was desperate. She tiptoed into the kitchen, very quiet and quick, and opened the refrigerator. She wasn't supposed to open it.

At the back of the bottom shelf there was a big beef roast, rolled up and tied with pieces of string. The grocery boy had brought it just a little while ago. Mrs. Hoffmeier was going to have it for supper that night. It must weigh six or seven pounds.

Babs twisted her fingers together. But she was already in such a fix that it didn't matter much, and they might not even suspect her. Grown-ups might think a little girl would break a cut glass vase and lie about it, but they wouldn't think she would steal a big piece of raw meat. . . . Of course taking it would be wrong. . . . It was a big piece; it could even last the thing in the ash pit the two whole weeks. Babs put her hands in the refrigerator and lifted out the meat.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?" her mother's voice said.

Babs spun round. Her heart was pounding so hard she was afraid she was going to be sick. How had her

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mother known she was in the kitchen? Mrs. Hoffmeier always wore crepe-soled shoes, so it was no wonder Babs hadn't heard her coming. But how had she known where Babs was?

"Put it right back," her mother went on severely. She looked down at Babs, frowning. She was a tall woman with puffy flesh and very light brown eyes. "I don't know what you're thinking of, to want raw meat. You'll have to wait until supper time."

She frowned at Babs a moment longer. Then she took the roast from her hands and thrust it back into the refrigerator. She closed the door.

Babs stared at the blank white enamel. Suddenly she couldn't stand it any longer. Neenie had said maybe she ought to tell her parents; she'd tell her mother. Nothing could be worse than this. They might punish her, but your *mother* had to help you, no matter how bad you'd been. She couldn't stand having the thing in the ash pit any more.

"Mommie," she said, "please, mommie, I — help me, I —"

"Barbara, there's something I want to warn you about," her mother cut in loudly and rapidly. It sounded to Babs almost as if she was trying to keep her from saying what she had to say. "I want you to take this seriously, do you understand?"

Babs's mouth stayed open. Her mother bent down until their two faces were almost touching. Her breath had its usual metallic smell. "I don't want to frighten you," she said, "but I've been hearing over the radio about a little boy who . . . It's terrible, he was burned with . . . Well, never mind, but I want you to promise me that if somebody offers you candy, or a soda, or ice cream if you go with him, you'll say no. Do you understand? Candy, or a soda, or anything like that. You must say no and run away. You're not to go with the man."

Babs was frightened. The strange words, the tone in which they were spoken, most of all the yellowish gleam in her mother's light eyes, seemed to her uncanny and horrible. "All right," she whispered. "I won't."

"Very well." Mrs. Hoffmeier straightened up. "Thank goodness you're going to camp tomorrow," she said, sighing. "I won't have to worry about you there. — Was there something you wanted to speak to me about?"

Babs shook her head violently. "Unh-unh. No."

"All right, then. Run along and play. And remember what I warned you about."

Babs nodded. She wanted to get away. She unhooked the screen door and ran out into the back yard.

Her run slowed to a stumbling walk. There was no use in going to the ash pit to see if it was still there, the way she had so often in the first days. The thing wasn't so very hungry yet — she'd given it a good

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meal last night. But it was getting hungrier.

Misery overcame her. She crawled in under the bushes, into the hot, twiggy, sun-dappled darkness, and lay there for a long time, crying. She cried until her hair was wet and her ears tickled. At last she hadn't any more tears left to cry.

The sun was still up when she came out, but it was getting along to supper time. She made a wide detour around the ash pit, opened the back gate, and stepped out into the alley — not quite an alley, not yet a street — on which the Hoffmeier house backed. She'd go see what Neenie was doing. She hadn't seen her all day.

Neenie's house was almost a block away. Babs hadn't gone half the distance when she saw an old man, with paint on his clothes, walking toward her.

"Hello," he said when he got up to her. He had a kind voice. "What's a little girl like you doing out by herself when it's going to be dark pretty soon? Ain't it almost dinner time?"

Babs didn't like his saying *ain't*, but she thought he was a nice man. "I'm going to my girl friend's house. Neenie," she said.

"And your face is all dirty," the old man said. He gathered up a fold of his jacket and wiped her cheek with it. The cloth was rough and he wiped too hard. Babs whimpered.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked. He sounded surprised. "Well, now . . . I'll tell you. I'll give you a dollar if you'll take a little walk with me instead of going to Neenie's house."

Her mother's warning recurred to Babs briefly. But this wasn't what her mother had meant. Money wasn't candy or a soda or ice cream. And a dollar would buy quite a lot of meat. "All right," she said.

He took her hand. His hand was warm, and slippery with sweat. "Come on," he said. He started walking rather fast in the direction from which Babs had come.

"When will you give me the dollar?" Babs asked when they had gone a few steps.

"When we get there."

"Where are we going? How far is it?"

"To the park. I'll show you something nice." He began pulling her along. Babs knew the park, but she didn't like his pulling her. "I want the dollar now," she said.

"You can't have it." He sounded cross. "As soon as we get to the park." He tightened his grip on her hand.

He wasn't her mother or her daddy, she didn't have to mind him. They were almost opposite the Hoffmeier gate. Babs didn't like him very much; maybe he never would give her the dollar. "I don't want to go," she said.

"You come on!"

For a moment Babs was quiet. Then she pulled as hard as she could against his hand. Even then she wouldn't have been able to manage

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it, except that his hand was so wet. She jerked loose. The gate was ajar. She darted through it into the Hoffmeier yard.

He yelled something at her — short words that she had never heard before and didn't understand — and then ran after her. Until then she hadn't been really afraid. She had run away from him, but not basically because she was afraid. But his pursuit of her into the yard filled her with an intense, paralyzing fear. Her legs turned to wood.

She stumbled on for a few yards, sobbing. She tried to call "Mommie! Help!" but her throat wouldn't let the words out. She couldn't run any further. Her legs wouldn't go.

She collapsed on her knees near the clump of bushes where she had cried for so long earlier that day. With a last effort she rolled back into it.

She could hear the slap of his feet. He wasn't running very fast. He was talking to himself in a soft, angry voice with words that sounded like they came out of the Bible. The noise of his feet got nearer. Then it went away a little. He had gone around on the other side of the ash pit.

It never entered Babs' head that now was the time for her to make a run for the house. She couldn't have, anyhow. She lay stricken in the bushes while he fumbled about in twigs and shrubbery, always talking in the same soft, angry voice.

He was getting nearer. Oh, if she could only die. If her heart would only stop beating. Then there was a creak. After a moment Babs realized that the old man must have climbed up on the ash pit fence. He must be looking down in the pit for her.

Another creak. Babs' eyes were shut so tight the eyelids hurt, but she knew he was leaning far out over the pit, looking at the thing in it. Silence. Then, in the loudest voice she had heard him use yet, "Iniquity," he said.

His voice strengthened. "The iniquity of the monster of the pit," he said. "Sinning. He delighteth in stripes, yea in the pit he delighteth. Whom he loveth he tormenteth, and great shall be his reward. Chastiseth. Beloved. The pain of the angels glorifies the Lord."

The words were horrifying, and yet Babs felt somehow less afraid, as if the contact between her two terrors had neutralized them reciprocally. She wriggled around very cautiously until she was facing the ash pit. She looked.

Um-hum. Yes. It was just the way she had thought it was. It was getting dark, but not too dark for her to see the old man bending out over the ash pit. He was doing something to his hand. Cutting it? With a knife.

"If thine hand offend thee, pluck it out," he said, still in the same loud voice. He gave a sort of whimper. "That the stone may be wet with blood."

He leaned way, way out and shook

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his hand. The fence creaked. She thought she saw dark drops fall.

He was crazy, *crazy*. At the thought the terror seemed to withdraw from Babs' limbs, leaving them free, and to come to an acute, icy focus around her heart. She gnawed her wrist for a moment. Then she darted out of the bushes and pushed hard against the legs of Albert Pike.

Babs didn't know what happened next. She had closed her eyes when she started her rush, and when she got them open again it was all over. It was almost too dark for her to see anything anyhow.

She walked a few steps away from the ash pit and sank down upon the ground. She was still sitting crouched there when the back door opened and her mother's voice called, "Bar-bra! Supper's ready!" from the house.

After the first few days, Babs enjoyed girl scout camp. The events of Tuesday night receded, and even the agonizing responsibility she had felt for her personal monster seemed far away. If she thought about the thing in the ash pit at all, it was with an easy assumption that it had had enough to eat to last it for quite a long while. The counselors at the camp were real, real cool; she liked Miss Ash, who taught basketry and beadwork, best. But they were all nice.

Guilt for the disposal of Albert Pike never entered her head.

She went back home on Wednesday. Her mother met her at the station. Babs would have liked to hug her, for she was glad to see her, but her mother never liked to hug. She gave Babs a brief kiss on the cheek and led her to the car.

Babs was used to talking without her mother answering, and she chattered away during most of the drive home even though Mrs. Hoffmeier said nothing at all. Babs ran down finally and sat with her hands in her lap, but she still wasn't anxious. The thing in the ash pit was still a good many blocks away.

The trees had come out all green while she was gone.

Her mother drove the car into the Hoffmeier garage with expert ease. It was a big car. Babs' father was fond of saying that it was too big, a gas-eater, and he wished he'd never saddled himself with it. One night Babs had waked up to go to the toilet. On the way back she'd gone over to the bedroom window and looked out of it. It was a fine bright night. She'd seen the car floating up above the top of the garage, and Mrs. Hoffmeier, who was in the driver's seat, leaning out and saying something to Mr. Hoffmeier on the ground below. That must have been a dream, though Babs hadn't felt like she was dreaming. But it *was* an awfully big car.

Mrs. Hoffmeier got Babs's suitcase out of the back of the car. "I'll unpack your things, Barbara," she said. "Run along and play. But don't go far. Your father and I want to

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have a serious talk with you as soon as he gets home."

Babs' heart gave a terrific bound. Her latent fear was suddenly wide awake. They wanted to have a serious talk with her — that meant she had done something bad. Had they found out about the thing in the ash pit while she was away at camp?

She looked up at her mother anxiously, but Mrs. Hoffmeier's face was as blank and impersonal as a mask. Only the white gleam of her very light eyes showed that she might be angry. But Babs couldn't be sure.

"Run along and play," Mrs. Hoffmeier repeated. She picked up the suitcase and started toward the front door with it. "But don't be long."

Babs could hardly wait until she'd gone in the house before she ran around to the ash pit. She climbed up on the fence. She looked down into it.

There wasn't anything there.

Babs was so surprised she nearly fell off the fence. She clutched at the rail and looked over once more. No, nothing. There was nothing there.

That wasn't quite true. The pieces of cut glass vase Babs had put in the pit two months ago were still there, and there was a part of a heavy tin can on the bottom, and some shiny marks, like snail tracks, on the sides. But nothing else. The big pink thing like the head of an enormous baby, the big pink thing like a six-foot eye — it was gone.

Babs sat down in the shade of a privet bush. She broke off a piece of privet and poked at the gap in her front teeth with it. The thing in the pit had seemed as permanent and solid as her own flesh to her; she couldn't form any idea of what had happened to it.

Finally she decided that it must have over-eaten itself. That crazy old man had been pretty big; the thing in the pit had had so much to eat all at once that it had burst. (Babs, naturally, knew nothing about the can of lye Albert Pike had been carrying in one hip pocket.) Yes, that must be it.

She drew a deep breath. Now that she knew what had happened she felt lots better. For a moment she sat hugging her knees. Then she got to her feet.

It was over. She'd never have to think about the thing in the ash pit again. It had killed itself, filled its big stomach up so full it had burst. It had been nothing but a big old stomach bag anyway.

She began to smile. She looked around her, smiling, at the house, the bushes, the ash pit, the trees. It was as if she'd never seen any of them before. She opened the back gate and started down the alley toward Neenie's house at a run. She wanted to tell Neenie all about camp. She kept yelling, "Neenie! Neenie! I'm back!" all the way.

Her parents were waiting for her in the living room. They were stand-

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ing side by side. They must have been talking; Babs' mother looked upset.

Mr. Hoffmeier looked a good deal like Mrs. Hoffmeier. He had the same white flesh and very, very light brown eyes. His breath even had the same metallic smell. But he was taller than she was and a lot more thin. Babs had always been more afraid of Mr. Hoffmeier than of his wife.

"Sit down," he said. His face was expressionless. He cleared his throat. "Barbara, you've been very bad."

Babs licked her lips. Her knees felt so weak she was glad she was sitting down. She didn't know what she had done, but she was afraid. "Father, I —"

"Very bad," he repeated. His eyes looked almost white. "I never heard of a little girl doing what you've done. I don't understand how you did it. How did you kill your glannanth?"

A stab of perplexity shot through the haze of Babs' intimidation and guilt. What was he talking about? *She* hadn't killed anything. He couldn't mean the thing in the pit — it was gone, sure, but she hadn't done it. "I don' know what you mean," she said weakly. "What's a glannan?" She twisted in her chair.

Mr. Hoffmeier bent over her. "You do know," he said insistently. "What did you do to the glannanth out in the ash pit?"

". . . I didn' do *anything*."

"What difference does it make?" Mrs. Hoffmeier cut in from where she was standing by the window. She laughed bitterly. "After we came so far! Ruined, ruined! Nothing but bad news! It will take years —" She controlled herself. "Be careful with her, Rysan," she said anxiously. "I don't think she *does* know how she did it. But she may be dangerous."

"Yes. But I'd like —"

"There's the signal now," Mrs. Hoffmeier said sharply. "Don't you hear it?"

Babs hadn't heard anything. The Hoffmeiers exchanged glances. They had withdrawn their attention so completely from Babs that she felt they no longer knew she was in the room. Mrs. Hoffmeier said something in a language that might be French — it wasn't English, anyway. Then, side by side, almost running, they started toward the rear of the house.

Babs heard the back door slam. She shifted in her chair. She had been sweating so much that the seat under her was sticky and damp.

For a moment she felt so sick at her stomach she thought she was going to throw up. It wasn't because she'd been scared, either; this was like the time she'd been up in an express elevator. It felt like her stomach had suddenly lost weight.

The nausea passed, but it wasn't until nearly fifteen minutes later that Babs got up courage enough to leave her chair and go through the house looking for the Hoffmeiers.

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They weren't in any of the rooms, and when she went out to the garage they weren't there either, and the car was gone.

Babs came back in the house. She pinched her lower lip for a moment and then went in her own room. Her suitcase was lying on the bed, with the lid back, but Mrs. Hoffmeier hadn't unpacked it.

Babs got her Storybook doll out of the bottom drawer of her dresser and put it in the suitcase. It made the suitcase a little full, but she managed to get the catches fastened. She pulled the suitcase off the bed and lugged it through the house to the back yard, where her coaster wagon was. She loaded the suitcase on the wagon.

She'd go stay with Neenie tonight. Maybe she'd stay there always. Neenie's mother would be glad to have her, she thought; she was always saying she wished she had another little girl. And it didn't look like Mr. and Mrs. Hoffmeier would be coming back.

Humming "Old MacDonald Had A Farm" and pulling the coaster wagon after her, Babs started down the alley toward Neenie's house.

Coming Next Month

For the first time in its distinguished history, Martha Foley's annual THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES includes this year a story from a science fiction magazine: Judith Merril's unforgettably poignant *Dead Center* (F&SF, November, 1954). Glowing with pride at this honor, we'll celebrate by bringing you, in our next issue, Miss Merril's new short novel, *Project Nursemaid*, a story of the near future problems of adapting our race to low- and null-gravity, rich in the warm insight and human intimacy that characterized *Dead Center*, *That Only a Mother* and SHADOW ON THE HEARTH. There'll also be *The Talking Stone*, the second of Isaac Asimov's science-fiction-detective-stories of the deductions of Dr. Wendell Urth; an uproarious tale of a haunted TV screen by J. B. Priestley; and a characteristic assortment of short pieces to balance these longer stories.

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Eric St. Clair, who is enviably married to two of my favorite science fiction writers, has probably contributed more to our knowledge of bears than any other single individual since Edward de Vere, with the classic line, "Exit, pursued by a bear," introduced the Ursidae to serious English literature. St. Clair's loving explorations of ursine (and human) nature were originally intended as children's stories; but a long series of broadcasts over KPFA-FM, Berkeley's unique and fascinating listener-sponsored radio station, has proved that these are, like all the best children's stories, even more delightful and instructive to adults. This is, I hope, the first of many St. Clair stories in F&SF; I think you'll agree that, with such charm and gentle humor as is here displayed, there cannot be too many bears.

Too Many Bears

by ERIC ST. CLAIR

"YOU WANTED A NICE PLACE TO live, didn't you?" said the beaver crossly.

"Yes," admitted the bear. "But —"

"And I worked my paws to the bone on it. I built you the nicest house there is — but you're not satisfied. Maybe you want a television set in it, or stained glass windows!"

The bear shook his head. "I — " he began.

"How about a home workshop with a blast furnace — you'd like *that*, I suppose?"

"No," said the bear. He liked the beaver and did not want to hurt his feelings. "It's only that it is — well — it's a little, just a *little* damp."

"Damp!" shouted the beaver, beating the ground with his flat tail. "Of course it's damp! It's under water, isn't it? Down good and deep too."

The bear shuffled his feet. "The door," he stammered. "The door, well, the door is under water too!"

"Just where a good door ought to be," snapped the beaver. "But, of course, if you don't want the house — "

"Oh, but I do!" exclaimed the bear. He sighed, thinking of his cave where he had been so happy. Only now, the cave was full of bears — too many bears. After the

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fire everybody had moved in with him, all his relatives along with a number of other bears that he could not place, but who were probably relatives too.

They had quarreled all day and most of the night: who would get to use the scratching post, who would snooze on the soft straw bed, who would lie on the ledge outside in the sun, until there was no peace.

So the bear had finally given up. He would get the beaver to build him a house, and then he would move away and let all those bears fight it out among themselves. He could be alone again, and happy.

Now the new house was finished. All he had to do was dive down through six feet of water and he could see it. "Oh, but I do want it!" the bear repeated.

They both dived into the pool, and the beaver led the way to the underwater door. They went into the house. It was cool and dark and damp, but it seemed perfectly comfortable after all. "Where does the air come from?" asked the bear. "It smells nice and fresh in here."

The beaver grinned with pride. "It's my own idea," he said. "I built a flue so you will have plenty of air. You can even build a fire in here and it will carry off the smoke."

"Well!" exclaimed the bear. "You've thought of everything!"

So they parted good friends again, and the bear sat down to enjoy the quiet, away from those quarreling bears. What if he did get damp coming home? He could always have a nice fire to dry him off, and the smoke would go up the flue.

"In fact," said the bear. "I'll have me a fire right now."

He piled up some chips the beaver had left, and began to rub two sticks together the way he had seen Boy Scouts do. Sure enough, in an hour or so of hard rubbing he got his fire started. He lay in front of it resting his paws, which were tired by now, watching the flames and enjoying the peace. The smoke went up the flue, disappearing like magic.

Like magic. Hmmmmmm . . . thought the bear. Maybe it *is* magic. There is something about a beaver, something magical. The way they can build things!

He peered up the flue. It was low enough for him to scramble up into it, and so big that he probably wouldn't get stuck. He could not see where it went, but it must go somewhere and if it was a magic flue it must go somewhere interesting.

So the bear poured water on the fire and climbed into the flue. It was still smoky inside, and the bear suddenly sneezed. It was a huge sneeze, so big that lights seemed to flash before him in the darkness. He opened his eyes.

What he saw made him paw at his eyes, hard. He opened his eyes again and looked about him.

It was indeed a magic flue.

He was standing in bright sun-

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light, in a small grassy meadow. On one side there were trees, mostly hollow, and the bear could see a large beehive in every hollow tree. He could smell honey, sweet and tempting, and he could hear bees buzzing all around him.

There was a stream flowing beside him, with a lot of fish jumping up out of the water and dropping back. One fish leaped up on to the bank beside the bear. The bear ate it at once. It was a salmon, just as he had thought, and it was fat and tasty.

"What a *wonderful* country!" exclaimed the bear, licking his face. "If only there were a place to live." Then he looked across the stream at a high bluff that rose to a height of a hundred paws or so.

The bluff was full of caves.

There were caves everywhere, each big enough for a whole family of bears. The grass that grew in front of each cave showed that nobody was living in the caves now. There was room for hundreds of bears, thousands maybe!

Certainly, there was plenty of room for one bear. He sighed happily, and started up the bluff to pick out a nice one. Then he stopped short, as a thought struck him.

The beaver. The poor, hard-working beaver who had built his house. If the bear just deserted that new house, and moved into this Eden, the beaver's feelings would be hurt. The bear couldn't do that; he sighed, and turned around.

He found the flue opening behind a bush and crawled into it with a sad, last look at the wonderful land he was leaving. Again, smoke tickled his nose, and again he sneezed.

The flue was still magic. All at once, the bear was back inside the house the beaver had built. It was damp and there was no honey there nor any salmon, fat and tasty. However, there was a current of fresh air and the bear sniffed at it sadly. He knew now where it came from.

"Oh, well . . ." he sighed. There was a knock at the door, and at once two bears nosed it open. They were wet and cross.

"What a shack!" they grumbled, but they did not invite him to come back to the cave he had given them. "We thought we might move in with you, but not in this hole!" Then they saw the flue. "What's that?" they demanded.

"It's a flue," said the bear. "For smoke."

"That's no flue!" they said. "That's a door. Let's get out of here before we get the willies!" Before the bear could stop them, they had scrambled up into the flue.

There was a huge sneeze that shook the whole house, then there was another sneeze. The two bears were gone. The bear looked up the flue, but they were nowhere in sight.

He sat down to think it over. After a while he got up and went out the door. In a short time he was back with two more bears from his

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cave. "It's a *nice* house," he insisted, but they sneered as they looked it over. "Nice for frogs," they said, "or malaria."

Then he showed them the flue, and up they went, just as he had hoped they would, thinking it was a door. "KERCHOOO!" and "KERCHOOO!" — and there were two more bears gone to Eden.

Somebody pounded on the door, and he ran to open it before it fell in under the blows. This time there were three bears.

"Where," they shouted, "are Vernon and Hugo? And what have you done with Yolanda and Carmen? They came in here, and nobody saw them come out. *Where are they?*"

The bear backed up against a wall and pointed to the flue.

"We'll get to the bottom of this!" shouted the three bears, clambering into the flue. The bear put his paws over his ears, but he could still hear the three sneezes like blasts of thunder.

Then there was silence. A fresh breeze blew down the flue. The bear listened carefully; far off, he could hear the sound of quarreling. Even in Eden! thought the bear, grinning.

There were only a few bears left now, not more than ten or twelve, and the bear had no difficulty in getting them to go up the flue. At last there was one lone KERCHOOO! that shook the house to its very foundation. The last bear was gone.

He gave a great sigh. He could never go to the happy land now, with all those other bears there, but there was his own cave. He could go back there now, and be alone and happy. He would not have to live under water — only what about the beaver? Unless he lived in the house the beaver had built for him, the beaver's feelings would be hurt.

"How do you like your house?" asked the beaver from the door.

The bear twisted his face into what he hoped was a grateful smile. "Fine!" he said. "It's a grand house."

"I thought you'd like it," replied the beaver. "I came down to check that flue. I want to be sure that it draws."

"No!" shouted the bear. "Don't climb into it!"

"Why not?" asked the beaver, climbing into it.

"KERCHOOO!" said the beaver. It was not as big a sneeze as the bears had given, but it was a good one for a small animal like a beaver.

The bear wrung his paws and peered up into the dark flue. He could see nothing. The beaver, too, had gone.

"Gone," said the bear. "That poor little beaver with all those quarrelsome bears!" Then he cheered up a little. The beaver, as he remembered him, ought to be able to take care of himself. Maybe he could build a dam across the stream and be happy.

"There is no question of it," said the bear. "Beavers are so magic

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that they make magical things without even knowing it."

He looked about the house the beaver had built for him. There was now no need whatever for him to stay there, with the beaver gone to Eden. He could go back to his own cave. He turned toward the door.

A soft plop sounded behind him, and he wheeled around. There lay the beaver on his side, panting a little. "My!" said the beaver, his eyes shining. "My!"

"Too many bears?" asked the bear sadly.

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed the beaver. "*Bears* — there were no bears there. Nothing but swamps and rivers, with trees all around. The easiest gnawing trees you ever set tooth in, and the bark so tender it melts in your mouth. I'm going to get my family, and we'll all settle there. We'll build so *many* dams —" And the beaver dashed out the door.

The bear grinned all over his face. "I guess I don't have to worry about hurting his feelings," he said. "I think I'll go home now."

So the bear has his cave all to himself now. When his back itches he can scratch it, and he can snooze whenever and wherever he likes without having to argue with a lot of other bears.

"I hope those bears like it in Eden," he says. "And the beaver too. Myself," he smiles contentedly, "I'm a home-loving bear."

Last Chance!

If you've ever attended a science fiction convention before, you've undoubtedly made your plans already for visiting Cleveland this year over the Labor Day weekend. If you've never exposed yourself to the infectious goodfellowship of these gatherings, let me urge you to visit the 13th World Science Fiction Convention at Cleveland's Hotel Manger, from Friday September 2 to Monday September 5. There's still time to register and receive the progress reports detailing the latest plans for the program, which will as usual mingle entertainment with serious discussion of the present state and future prospects of s.f. — a large proportion of both humorous entertainment and serious thought coming, no doubt, from the Guest of Honor, Isaac Asimov. Send your $2 registration fee now to the Convention, Box 508, Edgewater Branch, Cleveland 7, Ohio. See you there!

ANTHONY BOUCHER

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In his widely acclaimed novel, BRING THE JUBILEE *(of which a short version appeared in F&SF, November, 1952), Ward Moore achieved, to my taste, the definitive treatment of the* if*-theme on a broad scale, the creation of an entire alternate world which might exist if one historic incident had occurred otherwise. Now he turns to a more intimate, personal* if*: What if you had chosen a different girl in those far-off days of youth and choice? Or was the choice entirely yours to make . . . ?*

Old Story

by WARD MOORE

"LIKE A DREAM," SAID BOONE CORTridge; "like an evanescent dream. Finished and done with before —" He stopped and looked guiltily over his shoulder; Adele might have heard him.

His guilt was not for having been talking to himself, nor yet for the use of such an obvious cliché. Franklin Boone Cortridge — it had been years since he had dropped the "Franklin" even as a rudimentary initial; what made him think of it now? — could damned well soliloquize if he chose without feeling the least bit foolish, and as for clichés, well, the word had been thrown at him often enough since he had outgrown his callow preciousness and become a successful illustrator. It was what you put into a cliché that counted, not the form, the shell, the vehicle, which might have been thoughtlessly used by ineffectuals countless times. They were timorous of platitudes and truisms, these eggheads who sneered at his magazine covers or advertising posters, because they were afraid of the understandable and vigorous. They could not face the only real critical tests: evaluation by the vast majority who gladly paid fifteen cents for a magazine with a cover signed Boone Cortridge, or two thousand dollars for a car whose brilliant colors and flowing lines appeared on countless billboards over the same signature, magnified and strengthened by the lithographing process.

No, he needed no excuses for speaking aloud or using the handiest words. He had not wanted Adele to hear him for fear she might divine the thought behind his murmur; Adele was jealous.

For he had been, as an aging man will, contemplating his life with

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less than full satisfaction. And — at the moment at least — the chief cause of his discontent was women. At 60 this can be a frequent but usually futile subject for regrets.

Not that Boone had yet been forced into either celibacy or monogamy. Adele's jealousy was, happily, not entirely baseless. But Zona, Karen or — what was her name? Marilou — were not in question; it was the opportunities missed which embittered him.

The times he had spoken when he should have been silent, tongue-tied when eloquence was called for. Esther, dainty rogue in porcelain — they had read the book aloud to each other that summer when they were both eighteen and terribly serious — he had been so ashamed before her fragility. Sixty saw what eighteen should have seen: that Esther was not exclusively preoccupied with George Meredith; the delicate blue veins under the transparent skin contained warm blood.

Like a dream that left one close to tears on waking for the impossibility of recapturing it. Esther, Ann, Nora, Constance . . .

"Heavens, Boone — are you still in bed?"

He hadn't heard Adele open the door, plucking him 40 years through time like a diver jerked up from the ocean floor. The sudden change in pressure sent the diver's blood bubbling; a like turmoil seized Boone.

"I'm still in bed," he said coldly, reaching for a cigarette.

"I mean, aren't you going to work today?"

She moved around to face him, effectively shattering the illusion of privacy fostered by their separate rooms, dressed only in a slip. Her upper arms were disproportionately plump, tapering down into delicate wrists and hands. In clothes, the masculine shoulders were not noticeable; naked, the entire woman was acceptable; half-dressed, Boone could only wish he had never met her.

"There's no pressing reason why I should," he answered, lighting the cigarette. "We're not starving."

Her laugh was the perfunctory laugh of a well-fed wife. "I'm having lunch with Dora and Tess. Afterward we're taking in a matinee. Want to come along?"

Throwing Tess in his face again, ten years after that brief episode was over; poor, docile Tess — no doubt Adele reminded her also at suitable intervals. There was no passion in Adele's jealousy, only an exclusive pride.

"No. Are you through with the bathroom?"

By every logic the eleven years with Adele should have been an interminable retrospect — by every logic except the ever-accelerating pace of time. As it was they seemed like a moment compared with the sixteen he had been Grace's husband or the four (had it really been only four?) that he had been married to Connie.

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Connie — Constance — he thought. What childish petulance had wrenched them apart; what silly pride had kept them so? It seemed as though he could recall every detail of their awkward, virginal coupling but he couldn't remember what had separated them. Oh Connie!

If Connie and he had stuck together he might be a damned good painter by now.

Perhaps later he would go down town on a sentimental pilgrimage — *Might* be a good painter *by now!* He was a good painter by the only standards that could be used to measure work objectively. Silly professors writing in magazines which disdained pictorial covers were always talking windily about the widening gap between the popular and fine arts, with an implied sneer at the popular. Actually it was the esoteric cultists who had gone off on a tangent and the popular artists who had followed tradition. The others gathered themselves in cliques, mumbling their private jargon, utterly unable to draw (except Dali of course) pretending to find meaning in lunatic blobs of paint (hadn't a genuine, certified psycho once won first prize or something at a modern exhibit?). When Rembrandt or Velasquez (he was not going to be drawn into an argument about El Greco even with himself) painted a woman she was recognizable as such, not a three-eyed profile. Good painter! He was a good painter. He wasn't going to apologize for his success as though the only honest men were those who wore berets and sandals, grew beards and lived on charity. He was satis —

His regrets had nothing to do with his career as a painter. He would not have changed that aspect of his life if he could. It was things which had nothing to do with his work — or very little — that gave him these unhappy twinges. The things undone that he might have done and the things . . . Like marrying Adele. Or Grace, for that matter. Connie.

If he had his life to live over, his natural progress from dreamy irresponsibility to a calm appraisal of reality would certainly not be one of the things he would change. Somewhere deep in his memories was Connie's outrage at the idea of doing a little commercial work to buy them groceries. "I'd rather starve," she'd proclaimed, meaning it but not really believing they could starve just because they had no money; "I'd rather starve than see you turning out stuff like that instead of serious work." It had been a silly sentiment; it was her entertaining it that was charming.

He took out another cigarette and then put it back. Later he would go downtown after all and have a horrible lunch (he'd learned long ago to respect his digestion and tastebuds and not try to fool them at some little place where the food was just astonishingly good) while

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watching some enthusiast in need of a haircut explain too loudly to a breathless girl how he was going to paint a great picture or write a great book.

Really doddering now: ready to recapture his youth vicariously. No one but phonies hung around the Village any more; hadn't for years and years. Not since he had moved out after he and Connie broke up.

"Wonder if that house on Varick Street's been torn down yet."

Before he and Connie were married they lived in a room there. They called it a studio but it was only a furnished room in a Georgian house long past restoring, with early Nineteenth-Century plumbing. The landlady had been scandalized when they took up the ratty linoleum and painted the floor black, discarded the head and footboards from the bed to set it up on bricks, separated the curly-bordered mirror from the hideous dresser and transformed both with red and white enamel. But it had north light — cheaper for its sunlessness — so it was certainly a studio. They'd had parties with bootleg claret and grappa for Connie's two friends — what was the name of the girl with red hair? Persia? Per . . . Persis! — Persis and Mary, who thought Connie unbelievably heroic in living with Boone before they got married. And he had painted all day long.

Had Connie really been beautiful? (If he had kept the paintings — or even one of the hundreds of sketches . . .) Or just young and intense? Old men romanticized the past so readily. Not that he was ineluctably old yet; he had another good ten years before there was nothing left to look forward to. Connie at twenty appeared beautiful to Boone at 60, perhaps even more beautiful than she had to Boone at twenty; he would not allow himself to consider that Connie, wherever she was, was now 60 too.

Retrospectively Mary and Persis were also beautiful. The ache was for all that young loveliness, so haunting, so irretrievable, and for his own youthful obtuseness as well. Hadn't there been in the air a hint of something more than friendship with Connie and polite interest in his pictures? Hadn't Mary once or twice given what might be construed, by someone more alert and subtle than he had been, as invitation? Or if invitation was too crude or abrupt a word for something so delicate and tentative — for Boone remembered the strange alternation of shyness and callousness characteristic of immaturity — perhaps receptivity would be more apt.

And Persis . . . If he had not been so — so *young*, he might have attached meaning to some of the things Persis used to say, to impulsive looks and gestures he had thought nothing of at the time. Persis had been more than just thrilled at Connie's daring; there might have been an element of rivalry in her admiration.

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If he had his life to live over again; the inevitable cliché. (And here was one place where his motto of the cliché itself being unimportant, only what was put into it, was inapplicable.) If I knew then what I knew now; the mind of 60 behind the eyes of twenty. Everyman's eternal whimper.

If he had his life to live over he would undoubtedly do the same things, make the same mistakes. Or parallel ones. Even with the experience of 60 to guide him. You couldn't change patterns, only the insignificant figures in them. He might resolve with all his will to stick to Connie, nevertheless he would wind up with Adele or a reasonable facsimile. Suppose a miracle and he could actually have another chance? He might shake off his blindness and kiss Persis; in the end the pattern would be unchanged: he would look back and regret Mary, or not leaving Connie. Even supposing he somehow managed that side of his life more successfully, that very success might channel off intuitions and perceptions necessary to his painting; his regrets might not be for women, but for the work pursuing them had robbed him of. You could not beat the irony of life.

Poor consolation; what he was telling himself, in effect, was that he had done his best, like any other failure. "By God," he exclaimed, "if I could do it again it would be different!"

He had never been a man given to smiling at his own follies, but he smiled now. Imagine taking idle fantasies so seriously. The past was done and no resolution could bring it back. Life was, as he had told himself earlier, a fleeting dream.

A dream, an illusion, an unreal thing happening only in the mind of some cosmic Author, some universal unconscious. Why then was it fixed and irrevocable? Presumably that Author, if He existed — and Boone had no conviction one way or another — could revise the dream as He wished. And weren't His creatures made in His image? If one desired poignantly enough and strove mightily enough, and believed deeply enough —

Even knowing that regret must lie at the end of every alternate dream?

Even knowing this . . .

Even knowing this, he was startled to find Connie so beautiful after all. He had forgotten the shape of her ears, the breath-taking lines of breasts and thighs, the unreproduceable colors of lip and eye and flesh. Forgotten was a curious, a puzzling word, he had no notion how it had come into his mind in this connection — as though he had once been an old man, strangely reprieved.

"Been painting too steadily. Must get out and exercise. Clear my mind."

But the singular fantasy persisted — not obtrusively or continuously,

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but in vague hints and flashes, like the forgotten name of a friend just tantalizingly beyond recall. Not that this pseudo-memory was annoying; on the contrary it was strangely helpful. For instance it enabled him to appraise his painting with critical detachment. It was good all right, but not for the reasons he had once — *once?* — thought. There was a deadly slickness there that not all the technique of using palette knife instead of brush could hide. In spite of all his cockiness, an anxiety to please showed in every stroke. His pictures were pretty.

The realization didn't make him unhappy; he merely turned the canvases and panels upside down and began new, different pictures. He painted more slowly, more harshly. Connie cried over the destroyed masterpieces. He was not too distressed; he could hardly expect a young girl to understand all he did; even at twenty he had the feeling of possessing a much older, surer wisdom. He comforted Connie and reassured her, feeling somehow he was reversing roles.

Before he and Connie moved into Varick Street she had shared an apartment with Persis and Mary. Persis was studying music, not too diligently; Mary worked in a shop selling batiks and other Villagey things. Connie's move had not disrupted the friendship; it seemed to make the other two think it their duty to keep an indulgently watchful eye on her. With Cortridge they had a sort of brother-in-law relation which encouraged rough frankness. Mary, tall and nearsighted, bent over the canvases so that her thick blonde hair fell forward and had to be brushed impatiently out of her way. She told him he was deliberately trying to shock — his new paintings were positively ugly.

"Don't be ridiculous," Persis said, turning away from Connie with whom she had been whispering, not secretively but affectionately. "For the first time Frank —" she always called him Frank rather than Boone as everyone else did "— Frank is painting like himself and not a third-hand Puvis de Chavannes. You ought to be proud, Connie, instead of wringing your hands."

"I'm not wringing my hands; it was Mary who said that."

"But you agree with her?"

"Everyone has to be true to himself," Connie said, "and I'm the last person to tell another what to do. I just don't think Boone really wants to paint this way."

"Exactly." Mary waved a relaxed wrist triumphantly. "Boone's showing off."

"If I were really sincere," he said, amused, "I'd hide all my work."

Mary nodded, staring earnestly at him. "You would. Or destroy it."

Persis looked superior and aloof — exactly as he felt himself, except that she managed to look very desirable simultaneously — quite as though this sort of serious squabbling was to be expected of children, he and she

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being the sole adults present. Which was quite silly, for no matter how mature and detached he had been feeling lately, Persis was still only nineteen or twenty.

"I think that was a perfectly horrid thing to say," cried Connie, turning on her ally. "What right have you to tell an artist to destroy his work?"

Mary's usually soft lips thinned. "I say what I think; it's the right of anyone who looks at a picture to form an opinion of it." She looked elatedly and warmly at Cortridge as though anticipating his approval.

Connie walked over to the mirror and inspected a tendril of hair curling enchantingly in front of her left ear. "Oh, I see. I thought maybe you were setting up as an art critic since you sell so many knickknacks."

"Children —" began Cortridge helplessly.

"Really," gasped Mary. "Really. Naturally I can't pretend to the intimacy with art *you* have achieved. Of course, if a perfectly honest remark is met by sneers I guess I can keep my mouth shut. Anyway I'm going home. Coming, Perse?"

"In a little," answered Persis, lolling gracefully on the bed. "Connie was only being defensive, so keep your shirt on, dear."

"I think that simply vulgar. And in bad taste. Goodnight, Boone."

"Night. Like me to walk you home?"

"Oh no, thanks — I can manage quite well by myself, being neither a clinging vine nor a predatory female."

"Some day," said Persis, after Mary had closed the door with emphatic gentleness, "that girl's going to pop like a poor batch of home brew. She's all yeasty inside."

"Oh, Persis, you *are* crude."

"Am I? That's what Mary thinks about Frank's work."

"And she's quite right. I wish I hadn't snapped at her."

"Forget it," he advised.

"No," said Connie determinedly. "I'm not going to sleep on a quarrel with my dearest friend. I'm going after her and make up."

"You'll never catch her," predicted Persis; "she walks twice as fast when she's mad."

"I don't care; I'll find her at the apartment anyway."

"I'd better come too," suggested Persis without moving.

"No, I'll be right back; try to bring Mary with me."

"Mmmm," said Persis skeptically. Cortridge knew what she implied: the making-up was bound to be a lengthy affair with many Oh-it-was-all-my-faults and Darling-no-it-was-mines before the complete reconciliation was effected and Mary showed Connie the blouse or earrings she bought yesterday or the day before and Connie admired them and they made coffee or fudge. It would be at least two hours.

"Right back," repeated Connie at the door. "Try not to fight with Boone while I'm gone."

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He picked up his pipe and began filling it. For some reason the tobacco packed badly. "Connie's a wonderful girl," said Persis.

"She is," he agreed honestly.

"She just hasn't grown up yet."

He looked at Persis. How terribly, terribly young she was to prattle of maturity. When her wide mouth curved, it was in no adult smile — just a childish grin. Her green eyes sparkled with a child's expectation.

He put his pipe down and walked over to her; she leaned back on her hands and looked challengingly up at him. The body he felt was not a child's body; the kiss she gave him back was not a child's kiss.

"Have — have you a particular technique for virgins, Frank? Because I'm a little afraid of being hurt."

Some wisdom from an inexplicable source curbed his eagerness; a tact he had not known himself to possess guided him. Persis was not hurt.

Everything was straight, neat and in place when Connie finally returned. They were talking quite naturally, guiltlessly. Mary had decided it was too late to come back but she had forgiven every one all around. Even Persis.

His recently acquired sense of detachment, of seeming to look at actions from a point of suspended time rather than that of the moment — he eventually decided it was part of his painter's acute awareness — warned him that in the excitement of Persis he must not forget that his life was bound up with Connie's. If anything came finally between them; if he and Persis were to allow themselves to be carried away, for instance, it would be disastrous. He was sure of this, as though he could see the next 40 years — not prophetically but retrospectively — and knew he mustn't let go of Connie.

One day he impulsively suggested going over to the Municipal Building and getting married right off — as a sort of insurance against the afternoons and one entire Sunday he and Persis had spent together. He had not thought the proposal would be the starting point of his first fundamental disagreement with Connie but somehow it had been. Afterward he had been quite unable to explain the development to Persis.

"You and Connie aren't suited for marriage, Frank. Not to each other, I mean. You need — You'll never be a painter if you marry Connie."

"I'll never be a painter if I don't," he answered out of that strange, intuitive conviction.

Persis looked at him speculatively, as though weighing something, evaluating him quizzically in a way unflattering to a masculine pride inflated so gratifyingly only a few minutes earlier. Was he a helpless something to be acted upon, rather than a man living out a life to the best advantage? He became annoyed and defensive. Suddenly he wanted to break with Persis, to go to Connie, confess his infidelity and beg forgiveness.

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But in the studio there was only a note from her. Mary's employer had offered her a temporary job; she'd be home late; don't wait dinner for her, eat at the coffee pot, but nothing fried — remember what happened last time. Love.

He ate fried liver and onions at the coffee pot where he met Joe who had been doing abstractions in gouache. They argued cubism and nonrepresentation till after midnight. Connie was asleep when he got home. He woke her and clung to her and demolished Joe's theories for her benefit but said nothing about Persis. Next day, as soon as Connie had gone to work, he phoned Persis.

He continued to talk of marriage but Connie insisted there was no hurry. Time enough next year, she said.

"Or the year after?"

"Or the year after," she agreed. "I'll be twenty-two; as good a time as any."

They had another wrangle, a little more rancorous this time. A week later they had another. After a month she left him. Not angrily or bitterly, just reasonably. "It was lovely and I'll never regret it, but it wouldn't have worked." He married Persis.

The lingering notion that he would be committing some irredeemable harm if he failed to hold fast to Connie showed itself to be one of those false hunches by which such store is set until they are proven wrong. Persis had not merely been right in her judgment that he and Connie were unsuited to each other; she had been vindicated in her implication that she herself and Cortridge were. Connie had been lovely, enchanting, desirable; Persis was all that, and a tower of strength as well. She understood what he was driving at with his painting; she encouraged him to put aside work that was less than he demanded from it; she insisted he keep on when discouragement was unwarranted.

Persis' family accepted the marriage with surprising grace and did not seem dismayed that Frank was not earning a living. The allowance on which she had come to New York was increased. Enough to let them take a real studio with a bathroom of their own.

Those were good years, but better ones had followed. Young Tom had been born when they were twenty-five, after the affair with Mary dissolved — it had only been a minor episode for both of them, though possibly Mary felt she was getting back at Persis somehow, which was absurd, for Persis knew how firm their marriage was — and they moved to Central Park South. After the baby arrived Persis' parents came from Pittsburgh for a lengthy visit and Frank, who had hardly gotten to know them before, found he liked Clare and Old Tom immensely.

They were far from the Philistines he had originally anticipated. They did not think painters were immoral wastrels; they even preferred Botti-

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celli to Raphael and Seurat to Cézanne. Old Tom was prepared to go on supporting Persis and Young Tom and himself and whatever further Cortridge they thought proper to beget. However if Frank ever wanted a job — part or full time, here or in Pittsburgh — all he had to do was say the word.

After Ariadne was born he said the word. Not because he no longer believed in his painting — if anything he was more firmly convinced he was doing first class work — or because he wanted more money (Old Tom gave them enough, and would have doubled it at a hint) but simply because he felt like having a job for a while. If he found it disagreeable, or interfering with painting, he would throw it up and Old Tom wouldn't complain.

He'd been a little afraid Persis mightn't see it his way, that she would think he was betraying everything he'd stood for when she'd married him. But Persis, as always, was perfect. At 27 she seemed even more beautiful than at twenty. Her figure was fuller, her red hair just as lustrous; the green eyes had more humor, the wide mouth more sympathy. His life would have been a dreadful mistake without her.

She made only one condition: he must look upon the job as a sideline. Just as dentists and doctors and businessmen played at art in their spare time, so must he with business. So long as the job was a hobby he had her blessing; if she ever found his palette dusty she would tell Old Tom to fire him, and both of them knew Old Tom would.

Yes, Persis was . . . Persis. And not the least of her qualities was that she eluded his complete understanding. Her odd, speculative look which she sometimes turned on him and the children as though she had not finally made up her mind about them, was endearing rather than disturbing. He could not take his wife completely for granted; there was still the titillation of mystery about her.

Whether it was the viewpoint prescribed by Persis or whether the years had instilled an invulnerable discipline of work in him, he found that cutting down the time devoted to painting made little difference. Others seemed to agree; his first one-man show was a success; three oils were sold — and to people who really liked them.

As for business, he found it satisfying. He had had no idea there could be such excitement in specifications and orders, production and pricing, overhead and inventory. When Old Tom began calling him the boy wonder he felt the pleasure which comes with praise deserved.

He had liked Persis' father from the beginning; now that he understood his capacities he admired him. He even looked sympathetically on his father-in-law's metaphysical speculations; he began by humoring the older man, and found the discussions — which neither took too seriously

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— interested him for their own sake.

"Take metempsychosis now," Old Tom said. "The persistence of such a belief in disparate cultures and religions is, well, suggestive."

"Suggestive of wish-fulfillment," returned Frank.

"You think wishes are never granted? That faith doesn't ever move mountains?"

"You were talking about reincarnation."

"Yes. Wish-fulfilment — maybe. Interesting that the transmigration of souls theory is rarely found together with a belief in individual, personal immortality. Suggestive, I said; might be a groping, a half-guess at a truth."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Well now — take Time. What is it? We don't know, but unless we start thinking about it we take it for granted it's some sort of straight line progression: past to present to future. Living one life after another — a flash of intuition, say — can be thought of as this kind of progression. You are born, live, die, and are born again. Tinkers to Evers to Chance. Simple. Maybe too simple. Suppose the intuitive flash didn't go deep enough? Suppose there's all kinds of overlaps and erasures?"

"You mean, Frank Cortridge today, Joe Doakes tomorrow, President Hoover the day after? Too confusing."

"Life's confusing," said Old Tom, falling into a rare sententiousness. "Look, boy, think of this: how do you know the past is any more real than the future?"

"I have no concrete evidence of the future's reality. I have a thousand — what am I saying? — an infinity of exhibits which attest to the reality of the past."

"Do you? Name one."

"Why . . . Memory. I remember yesterday — Oh, all right; I'll grant you my memory is no objective proof. What about the tangible evidence — the written word, the resemblances of parents and children, architectural periods . . ."

"Prove nothing," answered Old Tom with obvious relish. "Nothing at all. We take the past on blind faith. It is impossible to prove that yesterday happened. We think it happened, we believe it happened, but we don't *know* it happened, the way we know the sun is shining right now or that a cut hurts or that a steak tastes good. We think it happened but perhaps it didn't — all this infinity of circumstantial evidence may have been created subjectively in the twinkling of an eye."

"Including the Parthenon and the Panama Canal?"

"Why not? There may have been no yesterday at all — you and I may have been created a demi-second ago, full of synthetic memories. Or if there was a yesterday it may have been an entirely different one from the one we 'know' and the memories, no longer entirely synthetic, distorted. Changed. Modified. The yesterday we 'remember' may be

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real only as Xanadu was real in Coleridge's mind; another yesterday may be substituted for it under the influence of some catalytic opium: despair, hope, frustration, desire . . ."

"So if life prove disappointing we might have a second chance?"

"Why not? Can you prove me wrong?"

"No — and you can't prove yourself right either."

"Of course not. Speculation is incapable of final proof; it isn't vulgar arithmetic."

"OK," said Frank good-naturedly. "And speaking of the unreality of the future, I'm not enthusiastic about this bull market. I've got a terrifically strong hunch something like a panic is in the cards."

Old Tom looked at him shrewdly. "Hunch or calculation? All the economists and business analysts are talking about a permanent plateau of prosperity."

"Hunch," replied Cortridge stubbornly. "I'm no analyst. I just feel as though I *knew*. And this time you can really outargue me, because it somehow is exactly the same kind of knowing as that which tells me I had two eggs for breakfast this morning and voted for Al Smith last year."

"I'm not going to try to argue with you. Your hunch and my figures tally."

So the firm had come through the crash of '29 on a solider basis than before. Depression or no depression, Old Tom was destined to be a millionaire several times over.

Felicia, the last of the children, was born in '35, the year the long article, "Cortridge: Painter in Search of a Master," appeared in *Partisan*. Eight months later Old Tom had a fatal heart attack and no one argued against Frank's taking his place at the head of the company. Looking back — as he increasingly began to do — he knew there had been no mistake on either side. He took hold as though Old Tom, in dying, had simply bequeathed his spirit and talents to Frank, just as he had left him an equal share of his money with Clare and Persis.

He hadn't neglected painting either, for all his fascination with business. *Geometric Study: Fugue on Young Girls* was hung in the Museum of Modern Art; he got two thousand dollars for *Leopold Bloom Reversing Earth's Motion*. If it hadn't been for Persis he might have been painting calendars.

At 60 Frank Cortridge looked back over a long, happy, successful, and far from finished life. From the day he had found himself alone with Persis everything had gone magically right. It was as though someone had stood beside him — behind and inside him was more opposite — preventing missteps. Like continuing with that woman — what was her name? Grace something. She had been just before Consuelo, that wild, tantalizing creature who had never quite decided whether she was vestal or wanton. And only a few years ago — eleven? was it really

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eleven? it seemed like yesterday — there was Adele, who'd turned nasty and threatened blackmail. He'd laughed at her and told Persis, who promptly settled the matter.

Dear, wonderful Persis; she had given him everything. Young Tom, who would one day run the firm with the flair of his namesake. Ariadne and his favorite grandchildren. And crazy, marvelous Felicia, who unquestionably was going to be one of the rare great feminine painters. But most of all Persis had given him himself and herself.

He put his hand down on the shoulder of his sleeping wife. His reading lamp showed her long hair, a paler red now and threaded with white but still glorious on the pillow. What other grandmother, he wondered with pride, looked or acted like Persis?

She moaned faintly in her sleep. "Dear," he murmured, thankful for her.

She wakened, abruptly conscious. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry. I was just remembering, and I touched you."

"Oh." She sighed and closed her eyes again. "I wish you hadn't."

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"I was dreaming, or thinking, or something. About how if I could live my life over again." A faintly wistful look of pleasure curved her wide mouth.

He smiled indulgently; unfathomable Persis — unfathomable and transparent. Just as children wanted to go back to the circus, day after day, so she dreamed of experiencing once more all the joys they had had together. He thought of Old Tom's interpretation of metempsychosis: re-live as compensation for disappointment; Persis had given it a new twist.

For himself he had lost that childlike insatiability; he was content. As an idle, transient wish he might think of the hot ardors of youth, but not with a pang of hopeless, tormented longing. Just a pleasant thought: to know again that moment, forty years past, when they had kissed for the first time. He had been set on marrying Connie — some wild hunch had ridden him that he needed to marry Connie — but Persis in her clear, forthright way had said, "You and Connie aren't suited, Frank."

He had been annoyed, he remembered. . . .

Remembered? *Been* annoyed?

He was annoyed at this moment, with Persis looking at him in that appraising way, as though the rapture that had been between them only moments before was irrelevant.

He shook his head. Recollection had been so vivid that for an instant he had actually thought himself pulled willynilly back from some remote future into this present moment. How strange and disturbing . . .

When the final break with Connie came and she had left, he again had

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the feeling of being involuntarily transferred, or manipulated . . . No, that was not quite right. What he meant was that a pattern had somehow been changed. Yet it had been clear for some time that his future was bound to Persis, not Connie. He even had flashes of prophecy when he could see himself and Persis years hence —

Well maybe he liked to think of the future that way. But it was inevitable. He phoned her.

"I'm sorry, Frank. Got a lesson today." It was the first time she'd refused to meet him. He swallowed his dismay.

"Oh, all right, if that's the way you feel about it."

"Don't get huffy. I've just got to give more time to my music. After all, that's the life I've chosen. Aren't you painting?"

"Sure, sure. I'm using my brushes right here in the phone booth."

Back in the empty room on Varick Street he tried to disentangle the normal feelings of disappointment and frustration from the perplexing certainty — well, certainty was clearly too strong a word — the perplexing idea that he had been set down in a situation where he didn't belong, and the oddly impersonal conclusion that something — something not dependent on his emotion of the moment — was awfully, dreadfully wrong. Not just sad — wrong. Things hadn't happened this way . . . he meant, *shouldn't* happen this way. . . .

He had the fancy that his despair was not the anguish of a young man whose girl has turned cold toward him but the prostration of an older man who sees a lifework destroyed and is helpless before the catastrophe. It was all quite irrational, he conceded readily — where did this mythical older man come from and what did he have to do with the situation? Besides, he was making far too much of a mood, a whim. Persis would change in a day or two; be as she was before. He was upset because she had a music lesson when he wanted to see her, a rather adolescent reaction. Cheered, at least superficially, he returned to his painting, which perversely refused to go the way he wanted. . . .

When he finally succeeded in seeing Persis again she carefully avoided intimacy with a skill far greater than he displayed trying to achieve it. There was always an irrelevant object in her hands or her conversation; she gave him no chance to close the physical or emotional gap.

"You know, Frank, Mary is really dotty over you."

"Isn't that swell?" Mary, who had taken lately to calling him Cort in that absurd fashion. What the devil was she throwing Mary at him for? "Persis — what's wrong with *us?*"

"With us? Why there's nothing the matter with us; we're perfectly nice people."

"Persis, why are you acting this way? Why have you been avoiding me?"

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"Really, Frank. You're imagining things. Of course I've my life to live — I can't see you every time you call me up."

"Why not?"

"As I said, I have my own life to lead."

"You could lead it with me."

"Oh Frank, don't go serious and get all kinds of notions. It would never work out."

"But it has — That is, I mean it has so far. It would work out. Don't you remember how you said Connie and I weren't suited to each other?"

"Well, you weren't, were you? Whoever marries you will have to coddle and protect you all your life."

"But that wasn't — isn't . . ." How could he explain what wasn't clear to himself? "I love you," he blurted out desperately.

She looked at him in her speculative way. "You love women, Frank," she said gently. "All women. And that's all right; there's nothing wrong with loving all women. Only this time I — I mean, I don't want to be the one to take care of you all your life."

"But Persis, Persis. The . . ."

The children, he had been about to say, with the irrational yet compelling idea that there were three of them. She was confusing him so he simply couldn't think straight. It was as if he were trying to disentangle himself from a bewilderment and get back to . . . get back to . . .

Something horrible was happening. Some predestined, *right* course was being thwarted. Something beyond his power to mend was going wrong. As though he were an actor with the script of a different play. And Persis was relentlessly, relentlessly pushing him out of her life at the same time.

Note:

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The F&SF Festival of Saki Fantasy continues with a little-known tale from THE CHRONICLES OF CLOVIS *(1911). Unlike most of those chronicles, there is nothing light or debonair about it (save of course the inevitable grace of its prose); it seems oddly like an intrusion from that darker world of age-old panic so often described by Arthur Machen.*

The Music On The Hill

by SAKI

SYLVIA SELTOUN ATE HER BREAKfast in the morningroom at Yessney with a pleasant sense of ultimate victory, such as a fervent Ironside might have permitted himself on the morrow of Worcester fight. She was scarcely pugnacious by temperament, but belonged to that more successful class of fighters who are pugnacious by circumstance. Fate had willed that her life should be occupied with a series of small struggles, usually with the odds slightly against her, and usually she had just managed to come through winning. And now she felt that she had brought her hardest and certainly her most important struggle to a successful issue. To have married Mortimer Seltoun, "Dead Mortimer" as his more intimate enemies called him, in the teeth of the cold hostility of his family, and in spite of his unaffected indifference to women, was indeed an achievement that had needed some determination and adroitness to carry through; yesterday she had brought her victory to its concluding stage by wrenching her husband away from Town and its group of satellite watering-places and "settling him down," in the vocabulary of her kind, in this remote wood-girt manor farm which was his country house.

"You will never get Mortimer to go," his mother had said carpingly, "but if he once goes he'll stay; Yessney throws almost as much a spell over him as Town does. One can understand what holds him to Town, but Yessney —" and the dowager had shrugged her shoulders.

There was a sombre, almost savage wildness about Yessney that was certainly not likely to appeal to town-bred tastes, and Sylvia, notwithstanding her name, was accustomed to nothing much more sylvan than "leafy Kensington."

From "Short Stories of Saki" (H. H. Munro); copyright, 1930, by the Viking Press, Inc.

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She looked on the country as something excellent and wholesome in its way, which was apt to become troublesome if you encouraged it overmuch. Distrust of town-life had been a new thing with her, born of her marriage with Mortimer, and she had watched with satisfaction the gradual fading of what she called "the Jermyn-Street-look" in his eyes as the woods and heather of Yessney had closed in on them yesternight. Her will-power and strategy had prevailed; Mortimer would stay.

Outside the morning-room windows was a triangular slope of turf, which the indulgent might call a lawn, and beyond its low hedge of neglected fuschia bushes a steeper slope of heather and bracken dropped down into cavernous combes overgrown with oak and yew. In its wild open savagery there seemed a stealthy linking of the joy of life with the terror of unseen things. Sylvia smiled complacently as she gazed with a School-of-Art appreciation at the landscape, and then of a sudden she almost shuddered.

"It is very wild," she said to Mortimer, who had joined her; "one could almost think that in such a place the worship of Pan had never quite died out."

"The worship of Pan never has died out," said Mortimer. "Other newer gods have drawn aside his votaries from time to time, but he is the Nature-God to whom all must come back at last. He has been called the Father of all the Gods, but most of his children have been stillborn."

Sylvia was religious in an honest, vaguely devotional kind of way, and did not like to hear her beliefs spoken of as mere aftergrowths, but it was at least something new and hopeful to hear Dead Mortimer speak with such energy and conviction on any subject.

"You don't really believe in Pan?" she asked incredulously.

"I've been a fool in most things," said Mortimer quietly, "but I'm not such a fool as not to believe in Pan when I'm down here. And if you're wise you won't disbelieve in him too boastfully while you're in his country."

It was not till a week later, when Sylvia had exhausted the attractions of the woodland walks round Yessney, that she ventured on a tour of inspection of the farm buildings. A farmyard suggested in her mind a scene of cheerful bustle, with churns and flails and smiling dairymaids, and teams of horses drinking knee-deep in duck-crowded ponds. As she wandered among the gaunt grey buildings of Yessney manor farm her first impression was one of crushing stillness and desolation, as though she had happened on some lone deserted homestead long given over to owls and cobwebs; then came a sense of furtive watchful hostility, the same shadow of unseen things that seemed to lurk in the wooded combes and coppices. From behind heavy doors and shuttered windows came the restless stamp of hoof or

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rasp of chain halter, and at times a muffled bellow from some stalled beast. From a distant corner a shaggy dog watched her with intent unfriendly eyes; as she drew near it slipped quietly into its kennel, and slipped out again as noiselessly when she had passed by. A few hens, questing for food under a rick, stole away under a gate at her approach. Sylvia felt that if she had come across any human beings in this wilderness of barn and byre they would have fled wraith-like from her gaze. At last, turning a corner quickly, she came upon a living thing that did not fly from her. Astretch in a pool of mud was an enormous sow, gigantic beyond the town-woman's wildest computation of swine-flesh, and speedily alert to resent and if necessary repel the unwonted intrusion. It was Sylvia's turn to make an unobtrusive retreat. As she threaded her way past rickyards and cowsheds and long blank walls, she started suddenly at a strange sound — the echo of a boy's laughter, golden and equivocal. Jan, the only boy employed on the farm, a tow-headed, wizen-faced yokel, was visibly at work on a potato clearing half-way up the nearest hill-side, and Mortimer, when questioned, knew of no other probable or possible begetter of the hidden mockery that had ambushed Sylvia's retreat. The memory of that untraceable echo was added to her other impressions of a furtive sinister "something" that hung around Yessney.

Of Mortimer she saw very little; farm and woods and trout-streams seemed to swallow him up from dawn till dusk. Once, following the direction she had seen him take in the morning, she came to an open space in a nut copse, further shut in by huge yew trees, in the centre of which stood a stone pedestal surmounted by a small bronze figure of a youthful Pan. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship, but her attention was chiefly held by the fact that a newly cut bunch of grapes had been placed as an offering at its feet. Grapes were none too plentiful at manor house, and Sylvia snatched the bunch angrily from the pedestal. Contemptuous annoyance dominated her thoughts as she strolled slowly homeward, and then gave way to a sharp feeling of something that was very near fright; across a thick tangle of undergrowth a boy's face was scowling at her, brown and beautiful, with unutterably evil eyes. It was a lonely pathway, all pathways round Yessney were lonely for the matter of that, and she sped forward without waiting to give a closer scrutiny to this sudden apparition. It was not till she had reached the house that she discovered that she had dropped the bunch of grapes in her flight.

"I saw a youth in the wood today," she told Mortimer that evening, "brown-faced and rather handsome, but a scoundrel to look at. A gipsy lad, I suppose."

"A reasonable theory," said Morti-

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mer, "only there aren't any gipsies in these parts at present."

"Then who was he?" asked Sylvia, and as Mortimer appeared to have no theory of his own, she passed on to recount her finding of the votive offering.

"I suppose it was your doing," she observed; "it's a harmless piece of lunacy, but people would think you dreadfully silly if they knew of it."

"Did you meddle with it in any way?" asked Mortimer.

"I — I threw the grapes away. It seemed so silly," said Sylvia, watching Mortimer's impassive face for a sign of annoyance.

"I don't think you were wise to do that," he said reflectively. "I've heard it said that the Wood Gods are rather horrible to those who molest them."

"Horrible perhaps to those that believe in them, but you see I don't," retorted Sylvia.

"All the same," said Mortimer in his even, dispassionate tone, "I should avoid the woods and orchards if I were you, and give a wide berth to the horned beasts on the farm."

It was all nonsense, of course, but in that lonely wood-girt spot nonsense seemed able to rear a bastard brood of uneasiness.

"Mortimer," said Sylvia suddenly, "I think we will go back to Town some time soon."

Her victory had not been so complete as she had supposed; it had carried her on to ground that she was already anxious to quit.

"I don't think you will ever go back to Town," said Mortimer. He seemed to be paraphrasing his mother's prediction as to himself.

Sylvia noted with dissatisfaction and some self-contempt that the course of her next afternoon's ramble took her instinctively clear of the network of woods. As to the horned cattle, Mortimer's warning was scarcely needed, for she had always regarded them as of doubtful neutrality at the best: her imagination unsexed the most matronly dairy cows and turned them into bulls liable to "see red" at any moment. The ram who fed in the narrow paddock below the orchards she had adjudged, after ample and cautious probation, to be of docile temper; today, however, she decided to leave his docility untested, for the usually tranquil beast was roaming with every sign of restlessness from corner to corner of his meadow. A low, fitful piping, as of some reedy flute, was coming from the depth of a neighboring copse, and there seemed to be some subtle connection between the animal's restless pacing and the wild music from the wood. Sylvia turned her steps in an upward direction and climbed the heather-clad slopes that stretched in rolling shoulders high above Yessney. She had left the piping notes behind her, but across the wooded combes at her feet the wind brought her another kind of music, the straining bay of hounds in full chase. Yessney was just on the outskirts of the

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Devon-and-Somerset country, and the hunted deer sometimes came that way. Sylvia could presently see a dark body, breasting hill after hill, and sinking again and again out of sight as he crossed the combes, while behind him steadily swelled that relentless chorus, and she grew tense with the excited sympathy that one feels for any hunted thing in whose capture one is not directly interested. And at last he broke through the outermost line of oak scrub and fern and stood panting in the open, a fat September stag carrying a well-furnished head. His obvious course was to drop down to the brown pools of Undercombe, and thence make his way towards the red deer's favoured sanctuary, the sea. To Sylvia's surprise, however, he turned his head to the upland slope and came lumbering resolutely onward over the heather. "It will be dreadful," she thought, "the hounds will pull him down under my very eyes." But the music of the pack seemed to have died away for a moment, and in its place she heard again that wild piping, which rose now on this side, now on that, as though urging the failing stag to a final effort. Sylvia stood well aside from his path, half hidden in a thick growth of whortle bushes, and watched him swing stiffly upward, his flanks dark with sweat, the coarse hair on his neck showing light by contrast. The pipe music shrilled suddenly around her, seeming to come from the bushes at her very feet, and at the same moment the great beast slewed round and bore directly down upon her. In an instant her pity for the hunted animal was changed to wild terror at her own danger; the thick heather roots mocked her scrambling efforts at flight, and she looked frantically downward for a glimpse of oncoming hounds.

The huge antler spikes were within a few yards of her, and in a flash of numbing fear she remembered Mortimer's warning, to beware of horned beasts on the farm. And then with a quick throb of joy she saw that she was not alone; a human figure stood a few paces aside, knee-deep in the whortle bushes.

"Drive it off!" she shrieked. But the figure made no answering movement.

The antlers drove straight at her breast, the acrid smell of the hunted animal was in her nostrils, but her eyes were filled with the horror of something she saw other than her oncoming death. And in her ears rang the echo of a boy's laughter, golden and equivocal.

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

THE FIELD IN WHICH THE SCIENCE fiction "boom" may well have the most lasting effect is that of books for children and teen-agers. Occasional adult s. f. novels appeared on the lists of general publishers long before the "boom"; but juvenile s.f. simply did not exist save on the sub-literate Tom Swift level.

Adult science fiction continues to slump in general trade publishing. If one can extrapolate from the half-year figures, 1955 will produce fewer titles in hardcover s.f. than any other year since the inception of the "boom" in 1949, with a 40% drop from the peak year of 1953. (Which was also a peak year in quality, particularly of new novels — and the drop there has been comparable.)

But juvenile books keep coming out; and in addition to the apparently well-established teen-age audience (Heinlein has said that each of his old teen-age books sells annually as many copies as a new adult novel might be expected to), the editors of juveniles keep reaching out for younger and younger readers — even in the face of the powerful opposition of the coonskin cap.

(A fortune of legendary proportions should await the first author to write a time travel, wheel-of-If story in which Davy Crockett beats Santa Ana at the Alamo.)

Best of the teen-age crop now under review is William Morrison's MEL OLIVER AND SPACE ROVER ON MARS (Gnome, $2.50*). Indeed, I'll go a bit further and say that this is the most enjoyable non-Heinlein s.f. for the young since that incredible day in the fall of 1952 when teen-age novels were simultaneously published by Poul Anderson, Arthur C. Clarke and Chad Oliver.

Like those memorable Anderson and Oliver books, this is Morrison's debut as a book-length novelist, for any age-level; and it completely fulfils the bright promise of his short stories and novelets. It's the story of a 17-year-old spaceship-stowaway who adopts a highly intelligent super-collie (not quite *Canis sapiens*, but close enough) and joins an interplanetary circus. The plot is far from new (our hero is a Defrauded Orphan); but the circus is wonderful — full of strange beasts, ripe show business characters, and the fascinating technical details of such matters as low-gravity acrobatics — and the writing is easy, lively, humorous and charming. By all means get this for your boys (and girls) — and be sure to read it yourself.

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Very nearly as good, if rather more conventional, is UNDERSEA QUEST by Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson (Gnome, $2.50*). Once again our hero is 17 and a Defrauded Orphan; but this time his adventures take him, not to the stars, but to the depths of the sea, first as a cadet of the U. S. Sub-Sea Academy and later as a penniless adventurer in the dome-cities of the sub-Pacific nation Marinia. The collaborators are, of course, among the most reliable of Old Pros; and they display their professionalism well, both in vigorous storytelling and in excellent detailing of the background of a submarine civilization.

Eric North's THE ANT MEN (Winston, $2*) is . . . well, the title is something of a warning. The "science" is possibly even stranger than in most giant ant stories (Mr. North has ideas all his own about creation and evolution); but the vividly described setting of the Central Australian desert and the colloquialism of Australian speech lend it some welcome novelty. Andrew North's SARGASSO OF SPACE (Gnome, $2.50*) is competent routine space opera obviously aimed at the audience whose concept of s.f. is derived from TV serials; unlike the Gnome books just mentioned, which do have adult appeal, it carries no indication that it's a juvenile. E. Everett Evans' THE PLANET MAPPERS (Dodd, Mead, $2.50*) takes an agreeable enough family 62 light-years out into space (by unspecified methods), where they proceed to do nothing for 65,000 words but map planets. Well, there is a brief brush with the inevitable space pirate; but I doubt if it's enough to satisfy the demand of a teen-ager (or any reader) for a little action.

On the pre-teen level (the publishers specify 8–12), Lee Sutton has produced an attractive entry in VENUS BOY (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, $2.50*) — as likable as anything I've seen addressed to that age-group outside of the adventures of Ruthven Todd's space cat, Flyball. In an excellent "afterword for curious boys and girls (as well as parents, teachers and librarians)," the author outlines the basic (if so often unheeded) s.f. principle that you *must* stick to known facts, but may invent where facts are unknown or in dispute. Within these rules he has created a plausible picture of the early days of the colonists on Venus, invented a number of fine Venusian animals, and told a simple but moving story of the integration of the colony with the native life-forms. This is another that you may well enjoy yourself.

Ivo Duko and Helena Kolda aim even younger in MARTIN AND HIS FRIEND FROM OUTER SPACE (Harper, $2.50*), which is labeled 6–10. The notion of a child showing a space-visitor of his own age the sights of New York is pleasing; and the authors have unusual skill in blending words with photography. But neither they nor their publishers

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have ever heard of the principle cited by Mr. Sutton, with the result that the book combines a certain amount of charm with a large dose of intolerable and illiterate nonsense. You may be willing to grant, as a pure fantasy-premise, a Saturnian moon with earth's gravity and atmosphere, where English is spoken; but this is only a start. To my mind it is shocking editorial irresponsibility to feed children such statements as that meteorites originated when "Jupiter's moon collided with that of Saturn," or that plutonium is "the metal of the planet Pluto."

Older children (the publishers are unspecific, but I'd guess from junior high on) will find an interesting, readable and reasonably reliable account of the facts of space and the future in THE PRENTICE-HALL BOOK ABOUT SPACE TRAVEL by William F. Temple (Prentice-Hall, $2.75*). Mr. Temple takes up just about everything here, from the early history of rockets to the probable methods of communication with extraterrestrials, and covers it all with marked economy and care (if with occasional misleading restatements of theory). I'd rank this second only to Arthur C. Clarke's GOING INTO SPACE among the large crop of such books; and it includes more topics than the Clarke, if in less detail.

Non-fiction for adult s.f. readers seems, these days, to be mostly about flying saucers. There've been 10 such books published by regular trade publishers in a little over two years; and a circular from a Los Angeles firm specializing in such matters lists 8 more from various obscure fringe-publishers. The two latest, with the familiar by-lines of Keyhoe and Adamski, have not yet come in, so I can report only on M. K. Jessup's THE CASE FOR THE UFO (Citadel, $3.50*), whose thesis is that Unidentified Flying Objects come from the neutral point of gravity between the earth and the moon, where a race of spacemen has lived, casually toying with the destiny of this world, ever since they escaped from the destruction of Mu (or maybe Atlantis). The jacket says that Jessup has been "instructor in Astronomy and Mathematics at the University of Michigan and Drake University." I can more easily believe in his space-dwelling Muvians than in an academic mathematician with so little sense of organization, logic or the nature of evidence. Against tough competition, Jessup has achieved the worst professionally published saucer book to date.

Still on non-fiction (if in this case primarily addressed to the reader *not* already addicted to imaginative literature), I can express only pure pleasure with Basil Davenport's INQUIRY INTO SCIENCE FICTION (Longmans, Green, $2.50*). This is not (what I still keep hoping someone will produce) an equivalent of Howard Haycraft's comprehensive MURDER FOR PLEASURE, but simply a familiar essay in which a highly cultivated and literate man reasonably

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accounts for the fact that science fiction is important to him . . . and may therefore prove of equal importance to readers who have hitherto scorned it. Unlike 99% of the critics-at-large who have examined s.f., Davenport enjoys (a *mot juste*) a long and intensive acquaintance with the field (I recall an excellent essay-review by him in the *SRL* as long ago as 1941, long before the topic was fashionable); and his knowledgeable and persuasive remarks should do much to counteract the onslaughts of the once-over-lightly boys. Science fiction enthusiasts, too, may find in this reasoned appraisal of the place of s.f. in literature a certain corrective to their extreme "S.f. is the Literature of the Atomic Age" and "S.f. is a Way of Life" attitudes. The book has a good, if brief, bibliography, but no index — and a surprising number of minor errors in names, dates and titles.

One advantage of the dwindling of the "boom" has been the reduction to a relative trickle of the spate of anthologies — a mere one a month, this year, instead of last year's two or more. But I'd be willing to accept anthologies at the rate of one a week if they were all edited by Judith Merril. Her latest, GALAXY OF GHOULS (Lion, 35c), is a mixture of fantasy and science fiction (largely, appropriately enough, from F&SF) telling "of switches on witches, of shape-stealers and soul-swappers." There's a little more reprinting of previously anthologized stories than is usual with Merril; but most of these (for instance, Simak's superb *Desertion*) are inevitably demanded by the pattern. There are 16 stories, mostly of the 1950's, ranging from broad comedy to pure horror, distinguished by both literary skill and originality of concept, and (as one expects) introduced and arranged with tasteful skill.

One of the best stories is (one might as well say "of course") by Theodore Sturgeon, and you'll find 11 more Sturgeon stories, totaling 125,000 words, gathered together by Groff Conklin in A WAY HOME (Funk & Wagnalls, $3.50*). Here there seems less necessity for the inclusion of so much already reprinted material (over half the book!); I tend to doubt Conklin's statement that otherwise "it would be impossible to present a sound group" of Sturgeon tales. But almost any Sturgeon is worth rereading, and there's some magnificent new wordage here. "The intention of this present volume," says the editor, "is to complement the earlier ones [WITHOUT SORCERY and E PLURIBUS UNICORN, both of which were largely fantasy], and to display Mr. Sturgeon's major gift as a writer of more orthodox science fiction." In this it succeeds admirably — though one might justly say "more *nearly* orthodox"; Sturgeon's doxy can never quite play it straight. It also succeeds in providing the best possible evidence to confirm Basil Davenport's concept of s.f. as living literature.

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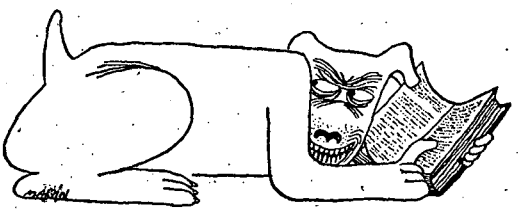
For *really* orthodox s.f. at its increasingly rare best, try Isaac Asimov's THE MARTIAN WAY AND OTHER STORIES (Doubleday, $2.95*). At a time when most of our best writers have gone haring off after psionics or sociology, Asimov proves, in a short novel, two novelets and a short story, that the pure adventure of space travel can still make a hell of a story. In particular the longest story (*Sucker Bait*, from *Astounding* last year), with its detectival exploration of a colony-killing planet and its fascinating concept of the Mnemonic Service (men with eidetic memories who achieve random correlations impossible to cybernetic brains), is balanced science-cum-fiction worthy of that Golden Age in which Asimov began his career.

The more modern sociological school is very close to its best in GLADIATOR-AT-LAW by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth (Ballantine, $2*; paper, 35c). When H. L. Gold introduced this as a serial in *Galaxy* a year ago, he stressed that "like any good story, science fiction or otherwise, [it] operates on many levels besides plot: It has a logically and excitingly constructed society. Its characters are the inevitable products of this society. The society itself is equally inevitable *if certain factors come about.*" This acute analysis applies also to the memorable Pohl-Kornbluth THE SPACE MERCHANTS, of which the new book is reminiscent in vigor, bite and acumen.

On the plot level, the novel has the weakness that its gladiatorial extrapolation of sadism-as-entertainment is never truly integrated with the story-line; but the study of corporate law, stock exchange finance and human character in a future revolutionized (for better and worse) by a startling improvement in housing is wholly admirable, in both thinking and execution.

* Books marked with an asterisk may be ordered through F&SF's Book Service. See page 128.



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When we reprinted Richard Middleton's Shepherd's Boy (*F&SF, March, 1953*), *we called it "the most logically hard-headed" of ghost stories; but now it has a rival. It is not for nothing that Thyra Samter Winslow titled her collection of attractively assorted short stories* THE SEX WITHOUT SENTIMENT (*Abelard-Schuman, 1954*); *it takes a woman as author and a woman as protagonist to see the really practical uses of a ghost.*

Rudolph

by THYRA SAMTER WINSLOW

WHEN ALEX TELEPHONED THAT HE'D be late for dinner Betty gave the children their supper — they had their dinner at noon — bathed them, and put them to bed. She knew Alex liked to play with them when he came home, but they had been running out of doors all day, the month was May, and they'd be pretty cross if they stayed up.

After she had tucked them in and kissed them good night she finished getting dinner. She had sort of got into the habit of having some of the same things the children had at noon — without the custards and the purées. It's pretty hard, when you're doing your own work, to get dinner twice a day. The children couldn't eat dinner at night, and Alex couldn't come home at noon. Even as it was, the firm kept him pretty late once or twice a week.

She went into the bathroom to wash up a bit. She thought that wives made an awful mistake letting themselves go and she always liked to put on fresh powder and a bit of lipstick before Alex got in.

There, on the edge of the tub, sat a ghost.

Maybe if it hadn't been a masculine ghost and she hadn't found it in the bathroom, she wouldn't have been so awfully embarrassed. But there it sat, apparently quite at ease.

At first glance, when she turned on the light — it had been early enough, when she bathed the children, so that she hadn't needed a light and there'd been no one in the bathroom, then — she thought a thief had got in. She wanted to scream, but something held her back — neither cowardice nor bravery — a desire not to wake the children. When you once get them to sleep —

It stood up — and she saw it

Copyright, 1954, by Thyra Samter Winslow;
originally appeared in "The Sex Without Sentiment," published by Abelard-Schuman, Inc.

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wasn't a thief. It was dressed fairly well, in a soft shirt and a dark, neat suit and it was slim and not tall. And when she looked at it steadily it had a sort of transparent quality. You couldn't exactly see through it, but it reminded Betty of a sort of thick gelatin that hadn't quite got firm. And there it stood and sort of smiled.

"What — what do you want?" Betty asked. Her voice wasn't steady.

"I'm a ghost," said the ghost, as if that explained everything.

"I see you are," said Betty. "What do you want here, I mean?"

"I was sent here," said the ghost.

"To — to haunt?" Betty asked.

The ghost nodded a bit sadly.

"You can't haunt here," Betty said. "My husband wouldn't like it. He — he doesn't believe in ghosts. And there are the children —"

"The children won't mind," the ghost said. "They never do. I can't help about your husband. He'll get used to me. I was sent here to haunt and here I stay."

"I think you've got the wrong place," said Betty. "This is a new house. It's only three years old. We bought it the year Junior was born. Don't ghosts haunt old places? You weren't killed on the premises — while the house was being built? They never told us anything."

"Oh, no, I wasn't killed here. They just gave me this house."

"Who gave it to you?" Betty was getting a bit indignant.

"The union. It's all divided up. Most of the ghosts haunt in England and Ireland — and there's quite a good union in Italy. But I'm an American and we have to stay in our own territory."

"But why do you have to haunt this little house? I think it's the silliest thing!"

"I don't like it any too well myself," the ghost agreed. "But times being what they are, I took what I could get." He sighed.

"But you don't have to stay in the bathroom!"

"No, but it was nice and warm here. You had the heater on and the rest of the house was sort of cold."

"Yes, it's cool for May. The children's room was warm until after I got them in bed. I always open the windows, then."

"I know. But I don't come on until dark. Union hours. I'm off at daybreak. I used to wait for cock-crow, but no one around here keeps chickens."

"It's against the law," Betty explained.

"I know. I used to live in the suburbs myself. We had some of the best times —"

"I'm afraid I haven't time to listen," said Betty. "You'll have to excuse me. My husband will be home any minute. Do you know Mr. Redmond? He's very conventional. Too conventional for his own comfort, I sometimes think. And if he finds you here in the bathroom with me, Heaven knows what he'll think."

"I'll go in the other room," the

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ghost said, politely. "I'll be in the living room." He oozed over to the door.

"Do you have to stay long?" Betty asked.

"Until they get me another place. Most likely all summer."

"You can't do that!" said Betty. "What would the neighbors say! We're just getting in with some of the nicest people."

"Maybe you could persuade them it was stylish," the ghost offered. "It is, in England. A castle that's properly haunted is worth a lot of money. And I do a really first-class piece of work. Always on the job. No fade-aways when you're looking for me." He was eager, now.

"No," said Betty. "It will never do. Mrs. Stook, she's the leader of things around here and she only thinks things are stylish if she sees them at the Theatre Guild or in smart magazines. She isn't being haunted, too, is she?"

"No, this is the only house around here that I know of."

"Oh, dear," sighed Betty, "then you'd better try to stay out of the way."

She just had time to powder her face and smooth her hair when she heard Alex at the door.

"Yoooo hoooo," he called, brightly.

"Hello, darling," said Betty, her voice low.

"What's the matter, dear? Tired?"

"A — a little." She looked around. Maybe she had imagined the whole thing. But no, there in the chair Aunt Emma had given them for Christmas, that didn't quite go with anything else, the ghost sat.

Betty groaned.

"What's the matter, honey? Aren't the children all right?"

"The children are fine. Nothing the matter. Only — only we've got a guest. We're — we're being haunted." Betty, in a sort of introduction, motioned toward the chair.

Alex smiled, then looked annoyed. Then he peered into the chair, jumped back.

"My God!" he screamed.

"Don't take it so hard," Betty pleaded. "It's all right. Very stylish in England. He's quite nice!"

"My God!" Alex repeated. "Don't you see! In that chair!"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," she said. "Yes, it's a ghost. He'll be here for some time."

She smiled at the ghost. Might as well make the poor fellow feel at home.

"This is my husband, Mr. Alex Redmond," she said.

The ghost got to his feet. "Pleased to meet you," he said. "Sorry I can't shake hands. My name is Rudolph — no, I'm sorry, Ma'am, the last name is Schmidt. I've been telling your missus I was sent here on this haunting job —"

"I see," said Alex.

Rudolph didn't eat, so there was dinner enough for Alex and Betty. Alex didn't have much of an appetite, but Betty felt quite hungry.

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"I'm sorry you can't join us," she said to Rudolph.

"Oh, don't bother about me," he said. "I'll look at these magazines and then mosey around. You won't mind me — won't even see me — after a while. I don't stay in sight all the time. I just thought that, until you got used to me — Wouldn't you like me to do the dishes? I've always liked kind of puttering around a kitchen."

Betty hesitated, looked at Alex.

"Might as well let him, as long as he's here," Alex said.

Rudolph washed the dishes very nicely. He washed out the tea towels and hung them up to dry. Then he seemed to ooze out, for he didn't come back into the living room and they didn't notice him when they went to bed.

"Wasn't that the damnedest thing!" said Alex. "Maybe we had indigestion or the house got too hot —"

"Shhhhh," said Betty. "You'll hurt his feelings!"

A few nights later *Born to Millions*, with April Morning as the star, was playing at the Palace Theater, on Grove Street.

"I'd love to go," said Betty, "but there's no use going to the expense of having Mrs. Wrench in. A dollar an hour and pouting if we're five minutes late and drinking up the gin if you don't lock it up."

A voice spoke from the other end of the living room.

"Say, what about letting me watch the children? No one will come near 'em while I'm around. And they both like me. Children are pretty good about ghosts."

"Might as well," said Alex. "It's the damnedest thing! But as long as he's here —"

The children were cozy and sound asleep when they got home.

They had been rather tied to the house. Now they went to the movies twice a week. They couldn't afford more than that, anyhow. And they were able to accept invitations, too, when they got them.

Rudolph watched the children, reported on everything.

"The telephone rang at nine. I didn't answer it. Junior wanted a drink and then I told him to go right to sleep again and he did. I put down the window a little when it started to rain."

Rudolph washed the dishes every night. He cleaned the house after they had gone to bed. He wasn't around in the daytime, which Alex thought was just as well. A woman alone in the house with a masculine ghost —

They were afraid, always, that someone would find out about Rudolph. How could they explain? What could they say? If they said anything it would mark them as sort of queer, apart. Outside of that, things couldn't have been better. Rudolph did his haunting so unobtrusively, did so many generous things, that Betty grew awfully fond of him. The children adored him —

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wouldn't go to bed until he got there, which made things pretty hard as the days grew longer.

"I hurried just as fast as I could," he explained. "It didn't start getting dark until late and then they called a conference."

"Anything serious?" asked Betty.

"No, just about the rules. Ghosts working out of hours in the wrong territory. When you see a bunch coming out of a night club, even if you're off work, it's the hardest thing not to do something about it."

"I can imagine it would be," said Betty.

Friends of the Redmonds began asking questions. Did they have a new maid? With all their talk of hard times and economy! And who was that Betty was talking with when Mrs. Martin passed? It was before Alex Redmond came home because she saw him get off the train. And leaving those children alone —

When Mrs. Stook grew curious, it seemed about time to do something. So, one night when the crowd was standing in front of the Grove Street Palace and someone said something, Betty grew desperate.

"The house is haunted," she said. "And the ghost they sent to haunt us is a perfect darling. He does the work of three maids and takes care of the children — and hasn't broken a thing but that old red saltcellar since he came."

"Doesn't she say the funniest things!" the crowd laughed.

"Come home with us and I'll show you," Betty offered.

Alex started to say something, changed his mind. "Yes," he said, finally, "I wish you would!"

They trooped up the steps of the little house, waited for Alex to unlock the door, went into the living room.

Betty ran up to see how the children were. They were sound asleep, their mouths nicely closed.

"Rudolph!" she called. "Rudolph!" There was no answer. Usually she found him here, waiting for her.

She went into the other rooms upstairs, into the bathroom. Rudolph wasn't in sight. Gee, she hoped he wasn't afraid of company. Slowly she went downstairs.

The crowd was laughing.

"Well, you folks certainly do arrange a good story!" someone said.

"What do you mean?" Betty asked.

"As if you didn't know! That story about the ghost and then this note planted for us. That certainly worked out smooth!"

"What note?"

"Oh, don't act so innocent!" Someone thrust a paper into her hand.

The writing was slightly illiterate, painstaking.

Dear Mrs. Redmond,

I'm sorry I couldn't wait and tell you good-bye, but they took me off the job and no time to lose. The children always sleep through

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the evening and I knew you'd be home early. You was right — they made a mistake in the house. It was Tenth Street, Grove Park, New Jersey, and not Grove Park, Long Island. I'll miss you all a great deal. Love to the children and my best to Mr. Redmond. You certainly was kind to me and gave me a real home. I'd appreciate it if you could drop around to the new address.

Yours truly,
Rudolph Schmidt

"You folks are clever!" "That was good!" they laughed!

Betty, looking at their faces, wanted to scream at all of them, wanted to say, "Get out! Go home!" She thought of the dishes and the cleaning, of the long hours she'd have to spend at home. More than that. Why, Rudolph was worth the whole bunch of them. And she had been afraid to let them know! And now he was gone!

"Yes, we're pretty funny," she said.

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Zenna Henderson began the chronicles of The People with Ararat *(F&SF, October, 1952) — which is currently available, for any of you who were so unlucky as to miss it, in the Bantam anthology* FRONTIERS IN SPACE *— and continued them in* Gilead *(F&SF, August, 1954), two stories which demonstrated conclusively that the tale of interstellar aliens may be neither an adventurous melodrama nor an intellectual exercise, but a deep wellspring of warmth and emotion. Even if you have not read the earlier stories, you'll find their background clearly set forth in this latest report on The People, which tells of a Group who attempted to deny their heritage and to sell the proud birthright of the stars for a bitter mess of*

Pottage

by ZENNA HENDERSON

YOU GET TIRED OF TEACHING AFTER a while. Well, maybe not of teaching itself because it's insidious and remains a tug in the blood for all of your life, but there comes a day when you look down at the paper you're grading or listen to an answer you're giving a child and you get a *boinnng!* feeling. And each reverberation of the *boing* is a year in your life, another set of children through your hands, another beat in monotony and it's frightening. The value of the work you're doing doesn't enter into it at that moment and the monotony is bitter on your tongue.

Sometimes you can assuage that feeling by consciously savoring those precious days of pseudo-freedom between the time you receive your contract for the next year and the moment you sign it. Because you *can* escape at that moment, but somehow — you don't.

But I did, one Spring. I quit teaching. I didn't sign up again. I went chasing after — after what? Maybe excitement — maybe a dream of wonder — maybe a new, bright, wonderful world that just *must* be somewhere else because it isn't here-and-now. Maybe a place to begin again so I'd never end up at the same frightening emotional dead end. So I quit.

But by late August the emptiness inside me was bigger than boredom, bigger than monotony, bigger than lusting after freedom. It was almost

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terror to have September nearly here and not care that in a few weeks school starts — tomorrow school starts — First Day of School. So, almost at the last minute, I went to the Placement Bureau. Of course it was too late to try to return to my other school, and besides, the mold of the years there still chafed in too many places.

"Well," said the Placement Director as he shuffled his end-of-the-season cards, past Algebra and Home Ec and PE and High School English, "there's always Bendo." He thumbed out a battered looking 3 x 5. "There's *always* Bendo."

And I took his emphasis and look for what they were intended as and sighed.

"Bendo?"

"Small school. One room. Mining town — or used to be. Ghost town now." He sighed wearily and let down his professional hair. "Ghost people, too. Can't keep a teacher there more than a year. Low pay — fair housing — at someone's home. No community activities — no social life. No city within 50 or so miles. No movies. No nothing but children to be taught. Ten of them this year. All grades."

"Sounds like the town I grew up in," I said. "Except we had two rooms and lots of community activities."

"I've been to Bendo." The Director leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. "Sick community. Unhappy people. No interest in anything. Only reason they have a school is because it's the law. Law-abiding, anyway. Not enough interest in anything to break a law, I guess."

"I'll take it," I said quickly before I could think beyond the feeling that this sounded about as far back as I could go to get a good running start at things again.

He glanced at me quizzically. "If you're thinking of lighting a torch of high reform to set Bendo afire with enthusiasm, forget it. I've seen plenty of king-sized torches fizzle out there."

"I have no torch," I said. "Frankly I'm fed to the teeth with bouncing bright enthusiasm and huge PTA's and activities until they come out your ears. They usually turn out to be the most monotonous kind of monotony. Bendo will be a rest."

"It will that," said the Director, leaning over his cards again. "Saul Diemus is the president of the Board. If you don't have a car, the only way to get to Bendo is by bus — it runs once a week."

I stepped out into the August sunshine after the interview and sagged a little under its savage pressure, almost hearing a hiss as the refrigerated coolness of the Placement Bureau evaporated from my skin.

I walked over to the Quad and sat down on one of the stone benches I'd never had time to use, those

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years ago when I was a student here. I looked up at my old dorm window and, for a moment, felt a wild homesickness — not only for years that were gone and hopes that died and dreams that had grim awakenings, but for a special magic I had found in that room. It was a magic — a true magic — that opened such vistas to me that for a while anything seemed possible, anything feasible — if not for me right now, then for Others, Someday. Even now, after the dilution of time, I couldn't quite believe that magic, and even now, as then, I wanted fiercely to believe it. If only it could be so! If only it could be so!

I sighed and stood up. I suppose everyone has a magic moment somewhere in his life, and, like me, can't believe that anyone else could have the same — but mine *was* different! No one else *could* have had the same experience! I laughed at myself. Enough of the past and of dreaming. Bendo waited. I had things to do.

I watched the rolling clouds of red-yellow dust billow away from the jolting bus and cupped my hands over my face to get a breath of clean air. The grit between my teeth and the smothering sift of dust across my clothes was familiar enough to me, but I hoped by the time we reached Bendo we would have left this dust-plain behind and come into a little more vegetation. I shifted wearily on the angular seat, wondering if it had ever been designed for anyone's comfort, and caught myself as a sudden braking of the bus flung me forward.

We sat and waited for the dust of our going to catch up with us, while the last-but-me passenger, a withered old Indian, slowly gathered up his gunny sack bundles and his battered saddle and edged his levi'd, velveteen-bloused self up the aisle and out to the bleak roadside.

We roared away, leaving him a desolate figure in a wide desolation. I wondered where he was headed. How many weary miles to his hogan in what hidden wash or miniature greenness in all this wilderness.

Then we headed straight as a die for the towering redness of the bare mountains that lined the horizon. Peering ahead, I could see the road, ruler-straight disappearing into the distance. I sighed and shifted again and let the roar of the motor and the weariness of my bones lull me into a stupor on the border between sleep and waking.

A change in the motor roar brought me back to the jouncing bus. We jerked to a stop again. I looked out the window through the settling clouds of dust and wondered who we could be picking up out here in the middle of nowhere. Then a clot of dust dissolved and I saw

BENDO POST OFFICE
GENERAL STORE
Garage & Service Station
Dry Goods & Hardware
Magazines

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in descending size on the front of the leaning, weatherbeaten building propped between two crumbling, smoke-blackened stone ruins. After so much flatness, it was almost a shock to see the bare, tumbled boulders crowding down to the roadside and humping their lichen-stained shoulders against the sky.

"Bendo," said the bus driver, unfolding his lanky legs and hunching out of the bus. "End of the line — end of civilization — end of everything!" He grinned and the dusty mask of his face broke into engaging smile patterns.

"Small, isn't it?" I grinned back.

"Usta be bigger," he said. "Not that it helps now. Roaring mining town years ago." As he spoke, I could pick out disintegrating buildings dotting the rocky hillsides and tumbling into the steep washes. "My Dad can remember it when he was a kid. That was long enough ago that there was still a river for the town to be in the bend o'."

"Is *that* where it got its name?"

"Some say yes, some say no. Might have been a feller named Bendo." The driver grunted as he unlashed my luggage from the bus roof and swung it to the ground.

"Oh, hi!" said the driver.

I swung around to see who was there. The man was tall, well-built, good-looking — and old. Older than his face — older than years could have made him because he was really young, not much older than I. His face was a stern, unhappy stillness, his hands stiff on the brim of his stetson as he held it waist high.

In that brief pause before his, "Miss Amerson?" I felt the same feeling coming from him that you can feel around some highly religious person who knows God only as a stern implacable, vengeful diety, impatient of worthless man, waiting only for an unguarded moment to strike him down in his sin. I wondered who or what his God was that prisoned him so cruelly. Then I was answering, "Yes. How do you do?" And he touched my hand briefly with a "Saul Diemus" and turned to the problem of my two large suitcases and my phonograph.

I followed Mr. Diemus' shuffling feet silently, since he seemed to have slight inclination for talk. I hadn't expected a reception committee, but kids must have changed a lot since I was one, otherwise curiosity about Teacher would have lured out at least a couple of them for a preview look. But the silent two of us walked on for a half block or so from the highway and the post office and rounded the rocky corner of a hill. I looked across the dry creek bed and up the one winding street that was residential Bendo. I paused on the splintery old bridge and took a good look. I'd never see Bendo like this again. Familiarity would blur some outlines and sharpen others, and I'd never again see it, free from the knowledge of who lived behind which blank front door.

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The houses were scattered haphazardly over the hillsides and erratic flights of rough stone steps led down from each to the road that paralleled the bone-dry creek bed. The houses were not shacks, but they were unpainted and weathered until they blended into the background almost perfectly. Each front yard had things growing in it, but such subdued blossomings and unobtrusive plantings that they could easily have been only accidental massings of natural vegetation.

Such a passion for anonymity . . .

"The school —" I had missed the swift thrust of his hand.

"Where?" Nothing I could see spoke school to me.

"Around the bend." This time I followed his indication and suddenly, out of the featurelessness of the place, I saw a bell tower barely topping the hill beyond the town, with the fine pencil stroke of a flagpole to one side. Mr. Diemus pulled himself together to make the effort.

"The school's in the prettiest place around here. There's a spring and trees, and . . ." He ran out of words and looked at me as though trying to conjure up something else I'd like to hear. "I'm board president," he said abruptly. "You'll have ten children from first grade to second year high school. You're the boss in your school. Whatever you do is your business. Any discipline you find desirable — use. We don't pamper our children. Teach them what you have to. Don't bother the parents with reasons and explanations. The school is yours."

"And you'd just as soon do away with it and me too," I smiled at him.

He looked startled. "The law says school them," he started across the bridge. "So school them."

I followed meekly, wondering wryly what would happen if I asked Mr. Diemus why he hated himself and the world he was in and even — oh, breathe it softly — the children I was to "school."

"You'll stay at my place," he said. "We have an extra room."

I was uneasily conscious of the wide gap of silence that followed his pronouncement, but couldn't think of a thing to fill it. I shifted my small case from one hand to the other and kept my eyes on the rocky path that protested with shifting stones and vocal gravel every step we took. It seemed to me that Mr. Diemus was trying to make all the noise he could with his shuffling feet. But, in spite of the amplified echo from the hills around us, no door opened, no face pressed to a window. It was a distinct relief to hear suddenly the happy, unthinking rusty singing of hens as they scratched in the coarse dust.

I hunched up in the darkness of my narrow bed trying to comfort my uneasy stomach. It wasn't that the food had been bad — it had been quite adequate — but such a dingy meal! Gloom seemed to festoon itself from the ceiling and un-

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happiness sat almost visibly at the table.

I tried to tell myself that it was my own travel weariness that slanted my thoughts, but I looked around the table and saw the hopeless endurance furrowed into the adult faces and beginning faintly but unmistakably on those of the children. There were two children there. A girl, Sarah (fourth grade, at a guess), and an adolescent boy Matt (seventh?) — too silent, too well-mannered, too controlled, avoiding much too pointedly looking at the empty chair between them.

My food went down in lumps and quarreled fiercely with the coffee that arrived in square-feeling gulps. Even yet — long difficult hours after the meal — the food still wouldn't lie down to be digested.

Tomorrow, I could slip into the pattern of school, familiar no matter where school was, since teaching kids is teaching kids no matter where. Maybe then I could convince my stomach that all was well, and then maybe even start to thaw those frozen, unnatural children. Of course they well might be little demons away from home — which is very often the case. Anyway, I felt, thankfully, the familiar September thrill of new beginnings.

I shifted in bed again, then stiffening my neck, lifted my ears clear off my pillow.

It was a whisper, the intermittent hissing I had been hearing. Someone was whispering in the next room to mine. I sat up and listened unashamedly. I knew Sarah's room was next to mine, but who was talking with her? At first I could get only half words and then either my ears sharpened or the voices became louder.

". . . and did you hear her laugh? Right out loud at the table!" The quick whisper became a low voice. "Her eyes crinkled in the corners and she laughed."

"Our other teachers laughed, too." The uncertainly deep voice must be Matt.

"Yes," whispered Sarah. "But not for long. Oh, Matt! What's wrong with us? People in our books have fun. They laugh and run and jump and do all kinds of fun stuff and nobody —" Sarah faltered. "No one calls it evil."

"Those are only stories," said Matt. "Not real life."

"I don't believe it!" cried Sarah. "When I get big, I'm going away from Bendo. I'm going to see —"

"Away from Bendo!" Matt's voice broke in roughly. "Away from the Group?"

I lost Sarah's reply. I felt as though I had missed an expected step. As I wrestled with my breath, the sights and sounds and smells of my old dorm room crowded back upon me. Then I caught myself. It was probably only a turn of phrase. This futile, desolate unhappiness couldn't possibly be related in any way to *that* magic. . . .

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"Where *is* Dorcas?" Sarah asked, as though she knew the answer already.

"Punished." Matt's voice was hard and unchildlike. "She jumped."

"Jumped!" Sarah was shocked.

"Over the edge of the porch. Clear down to the path. Father saw her. I think she let him see her on purpose." His voice was defiant. "Someday when I get older, I'm going to jump, too — all I want to — even over the house. Right in front of Father."

"Oh, Matt!" The cry was horrified and admiring. "You wouldn't! You couldn't. Not so far, not right in front of father!"

"I would so," retorted Matt. "I could so, because I —" His words cut off sharply. "Sarah," he went on, "can you figure any way, *any* way that jumping could be evil? It doesn't hurt anyone. It isn't ugly. There isn't any law —"

"Where is Dorcas?" Sarah's voice was almost inaudible. "In the hidey hole again?" Almost she was answering Matt's question instead of asking one of her own.

"Yes," said Matt. "In the dark with only bread to eat. So she can learn what a hunted animal feels like. An animal that is different, that other animals hate and hunt." His bitter voice put quotes around the words.

"You see," whispered Sarah. "You see?"

In the silence following, I heard the quiet closing of a door and the slight vibration of the floor as Matt passed my room. I eased back onto my pillow. I lay back, staring toward the ceiling. What dark thing was here in this house? In this community? Frightened children whispering in the dark. Rebellious children in hidey holes learning how hunted animals feel. And a Group . . .? No it couldn't be. It was just the recent reminder of being on campus again that made me even consider that this darkness might in some way be the reverse of the golden coin Karen had showed me.

Almost my heart failed me when I saw the school. It was one of those brick monstrosities that went up around the turn of the century. This one had been built for a boom town, but now all the upper windows were boarded up and obviously long out of use. The lower floor was blank too, except for two rooms — though with the handful of children quietly standing around the door, it was apparent that only one room was needed. And not only was the building deserted: the yard was swept clean from side to side, innocent of grass or trees — or playground equipment. There *was* a deep grove just beyond the school, though, and the glint of water down canyon.

"No swings?" I asked the three children who were escorting me. "No slides? No seesaws?"

"No!" Sarah's voice was unhappily surprised. Matt scowled at her warningly.

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"No," he said, "We don't swing or slide — nor see a saw!" He grinned up at me faintly.

"What a shame!" I said. "Did they all wear out? Can't the school afford new ones?"

"We don't swing or slide or see-saw." The grin was dead. "We don't believe in it."

There's nothing quite so flat and incontestable as that last statement. I've heard it as an excuse for practically every type of omission but, so help me! never applied to playground equipment. I couldn't think of a reply any more intelligent than *oh* so I didn't say anything.

All week long I felt as if I were wading through knee-deep jello or trying to lift a king-sized feather bed up over my head. I used up every device I ever thought of to rouse the class to enthusiasm — about anything, *anything!* They were polite and submissive and did what was asked of them, but joylessly, apathetically, enduringly.

Finally, just before dismissal time on Friday, I leaned in desperation across my desk.

"Don't you like *anything?*" I pleaded. "Isn't *anything* fun?"

Dorcas Diemus' mouth opened into the tense silence. I saw Matt kick quickly, warningly against the leg of the desk. Her mouth closed.

"I think school is fun," I said. "I think we can enjoy all kinds of things. I want to enjoy teaching, but I can't unless you enjoy learning."

"We learn," said Dorcas quickly. "We aren't stupid."

"You learn," I acknowledged. "You aren't stupid. But don't any of you *like* school?"

"I like school," piped up Martha, my first grade. "I think it's fun!"

"Thank you, Martha," I said, "And the rest of you —" I glared at them in mock anger. "You're going to have fun if I have to beat it into you!"

To my dismay, they shrank down apprehensively in their seats and exchanged troubled glances. But before I could hastily explain myself, Matt laughed and Dorcas joined him. And I beamed fatuously to hear the hesitant rusty laughter spread across the room, but I saw Esther's hands shake as she wiped tears from her ten-year-old eyes. Tears — of laughter?

That night I twisted in the darkness of my room, almost too tired to sleep, worrying and wondering. What had blighted these people? They had health, they had beauty — the curve of Martha's cheek against the window was a song, the lift of Dorcas' eyebrows was breathless grace. They were fed . . . adequately, clothed . . . adequately, housed . . . adequately, but nothing like they could have been. I'd seen more joy and delight and enthusiasm from little campground kids who slept in cardboard shacks and washed — if they ever did — in canals and ate whatever edible

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came their way, but grinned, even when impetigo or cold sores bled across their grins.

But these lifeless kids! My prayers were troubled and I slept restlessly.

A month or so later, things had improved a little bit — but not much. At least there was more relaxation in the classroom. And I found that they had no deep-rooted convictions against plants, so we had things growing on the deep window sills — stuff we transplanted from the spring and from among the trees. And we had jars of minnows from the creek and one drowsy horney-toad who roused in his box of dirt only to flick up the ants brought for his dinner. And we sang — loudly and enthusiastically — but, miracle of miracles, without even one monotone in the whole room. But we *didn't* sing "Up, Up In The Sky" nor "How Do You Like To Go Up In A Swing?" My solos of such songs were received with embarrassed blushes and lowered eyes!

There had been one dust-up between us though — this matter of shuffling everywhere they walked.

"Pick up your feet, for goodness' sake," I said irritably one morning when the *shoosh*, *shoosh*, *shoosh* of their coming and going finally got my skin off. "Surely they're not so heavy you can't lift them."

Timmy, who happened to be the trigger this time, nibbled unhappily at one finger. "I can't," he whispered. "Not supposed to."

"Not supposed to?" I forgot momentarily how warily I'd been going with these frightened mice of children. "Why not? Surely there's no reason in the world why you can't walk quietly."

Matt looked unhappily over at Miriam, the sophomore who was our entire high school. She looked aside, biting her lower lip, troubled. Then she turned back and said, "It is customary in Bendo."

"To shuffle along?" I was forgetting any manners I had. "Whatever for?"

"That's the way we do in Bendo." There was no anger in her defense, only resignation.

"Perhaps that's the way you do at home," I said. "But here at school let's pick our feet up. It makes too much disturbance otherwise."

"But it's bad —" began Esther.

Matt's hand shushed her in a hurry.

"Mr. Diemus said what we did at school was my business," I told them. "He said not to bother your parents with our problems. One of our problems is too much noise when others are trying to work. At least in our schoolroom, let's lift our feet and walk quietly."

The children considered the suggestion solemnly and turned to Matt and Miriam for guidance. They both nodded and we went back to work. For the next few minutes, from the corner of my eyes, I saw with amazement all the unnecessary trips back and forth across the

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room, with high lifted feet, with grins and side glances that marked such trips as high adventure — as a delightfully daring thing to do! The whole deal had me bewildered. Thinking back, I realized that not only the children of Bendo scuffled, but all the adults did too — as though they were afraid to lose contact with the earth, as though . . . I shook my head and went on with the lesson.

Before noon, though, the endless *shoosh, shoosh, shoosh,* of feet began again. Habit was too much for the children. So I silently filed the sound under *Uncurable, Endurable,* and let the matter drop.

I sighed as I watched the children leave at lunch time. It seemed to me that with the unprecedented luxury of a whole hour for lunch, they'd all go home. The bell tower was visible from nearly every house in town. But instead, they all brought tight little paper sacks with dull crumbly sandwiches and unimaginative apples in them. And silently, with their dull scuffly steps they disappeared into the thicket of trees around the spring.

Everything is dulled around here, I thought. Even the sunlight is blunted as it floods the hills and canyons. There is no mirth, no laughter. No high jinks or cutting up. No pre-adolescent silliness. No adolescent foolishness. Just quiet children, enduring.

I don't usually snoop, but I began wondering if perhaps the kids were different when they were away from me — and from their parents. So when I got back at 12:30 from an adequate but uninspired lunch at Diemus' house, I kept on walking past the school house and quietly down into the grove, moving cautiously through the scanty undergrowth until I could lean over a lichened boulder and look down on the children.

Some were lying around on the short still grass, hands under their heads, blinking up at the brightness of the sky between the leaves. Esther and little Martha were hunting out fillaree seed pods and counting the tines of the pitchforks and rakes and harrows they resembled. I smiled, remembering how I used to do the same thing.

"I dreamed last night." Dorcas thrust the statement defiantly into the drowsy silence. "I dreamed about The Home."

My sudden astonished movement was covered by Martha's horrified, "Oh, Dorcas!"

"What's wrong with The Home?" cried Dorcas, her cheeks scarlet. "There *was* a Home! There was! There was! Why shouldn't we talk about it?"

I listened avidly. This couldn't be just coincidence — a Group and now The Home. There must be some connection. . . . I pressed closer against the rough rock.

"But it's bad!" cried Esther. "You'll be punished! We can't talk about The Home!"

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"Why not?" asked Joel as though it had just occurred to him, as things do just occur to you when you're thirteen. He sat up slowly. "Why can't we?"

There was a short tense silence.

"I've dreamed too," said Matt. "I've dreamed of The Home — and it's *good*, it's good!"

"Who hasn't dreamed?" asked Miriam. "We all have, haven't we? Even our parents. I can tell by Mother's eyes when she has."

"Did you ever ask how come we aren't supposed to talk about it?" asked Joel. "I mean and ever get any answer except that it's bad."

"I think it has something to do with a long time ago," said Matt. "Something about when the Group first came —"

"I don't think it's just dreams," declared Miriam, "because I don't have to be asleep. I think it's Remembering."

"Remembering?" asked Dorcas. "How can we remember something we never knew?"

"I don't know," admitted Miriam, "But I'll bet it is."

"I remember," volunteered Talitha — who never volunteered anything.

"Hush!" whispered Abie, the second grade next-to-youngest who always whispered.

"I remember," Talitha went on stubbornly. "I remember a dress that was too little so the mother just stretched the skirt till it was long enough and it stayed stretched. 'nen she pulled the waist out big enough and the little girl put it on and flew away."

"Hoh!" Timmy scoffed. "I remember better than that." His face stilled and his eyes widened. "The ship was so tall it was like a mountain and the people went in the high, high door and they didn't have a ladder. 'Nen there were stars, big burning ones — not squinchy little ones like ours."

"It went too fast!" That was Abie! Talking eagerly! "When the air came it made the ship hot and the little baby died before all the little boats left the ship." He scoonched down suddenly, leaning against Talitha and whimpering.

"You see!" Miriam lifted her chin triumphantly. "We've all dreamed — I mean remembered!"

"I guess so," said Matt. "I remember. It's *lifting*, Talitha, not flying. You go and go as high as you like, as far as you want to and don't *ever* have to touch the ground — at all! At all!" He pounded his fist into the gravelly red soil beside him.

"And you can dance in the air, too," sighed Miriam. "Freer than a bird, lighter than —"

Esther scrambled to her feet, white-faced and panic stricken. "Stop! Stop! It's evil! It's bad! I'll tell Father! We can't dream — or lift — or dance! It's bad, it's bad! You'll die for it! You'll die for it!"

Joel jumped to his feet and grabbed Esther's arm.

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"Can we die any deader?" he cried, shaking her brutally, "You call *this* being alive?" He hunched down apprehensively and shambled a few scuffling steps across the clearing.

I fled blindly back to school, trying to wink away my tears without admitting I was crying, crying for these poor kids who were groping so hopelessly for something they knew they should have. Why was it so rigorously denied them? Surely, if they were what I thought them . . . And they could be! They could be!

I grabbed the bell rope and pulled hard. Reluctantly the bell moved and rolled.

"*One o'clock*," it clanged. "*One o'clock!*"

I watched the children returning with slow, uneager, shuffling steps.

That night I started a letter:

Dear Karen,

Yep, 'sme after all these years. And, oh, Karen! I've found some more! Some more of The People! Remember how much you wished you knew if any other Groups besides yours had survived the Crossing? How you worried about them and wanted to find them if they had? Well, *I've* found a whole Group! But it's a sick, unhappy group. Your heart would break to see them. If you could come and start them on the right path again . . .

I put my pen down. I looked at the lines I had written and then crumpled the paper slowly. This was *my* Group. I had found them. Sure, I'd tell Karen — but later. Later, after — well, after *I* had tried to start them on the right path — at least the children.

After all, I knew a little of their potentialities. Hadn't Karen briefed me in those unguarded magical hours in the old Dorm, drawn to me as I was to her by some mutual sympathy that seemed stronger than the usual roommate attachment, telling me things no outsider had a right to hear? And if, when I finally told her and turned the Group over to her, if it could be a joyous gift — then I could feel that I had repaid her a little for the wonder world she had opened to me.

Yeah, I thought ruefully — and there's nothing like a large portion of ignorance to give one a large portion of confidence. But I did want to try — desperately. Maybe if I could break prison for someone else, then perhaps my own bars . . . I dropped the paper in the wastebasket.

But it was several weeks before I could bring myself to do anything to let the children know I knew about them. It was such an impossible situation, even if it were true — and if it weren't, what kind of lunacy would they suspect me of?

When I finally set my teeth and swore a swear to myself that I'd do something definite, my hands shook

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and my breath was a flutter in my dry throat.

"Today," I said with an effort. "Today is Friday." Which gem of wisdom the children received with charitable silence. "We've been working hard all week so let's have fun today." This stirred the children — half with pleasure, half with apprehension. They, poor kids, found my "fun" much harder than any kind of work I could give them. But some of them were acquiring a taste for it. Martha had even learned to skip!

"First, monitors pass the composition paper." Esther and Abie scuffled hurriedly around with the paper, and the pencil sharpener got a thorough work-out. At least these kids didn't differ from others in their pleasure with grinding their pencils away at the slightest excuse.

"Now," I gulped. "We're going to write." Which obvious asininity was passed over with forbearance, though Miriam looked at me wonderingly before she bent her head and let her hair shadow her face. "Today I want you all to write about the same thing. Here is our subject."

Gratefully I turned my back on the children's waiting eyes and printed slowly

I REMEMBER THE HOME

I heard the sudden intake of breath that worked itself downward from Miriam to Talitha and then the rapid whisper that informed Abie and Martha. I heard Esther's muffled cry and I turned slowly around and leaned against the desk.

"There are so many beautiful things to remember about The Home," I said into the strained silence. "So many wonderful things. And even the sad memories are better than forgetting, because The Home was *good*. Tell me what you remember about The Home."

"We can't!" Joel and Matt were on their feet simultaneously.

"Why can't we?" cried Dorcas. "Why can't we?"

"It's bad!" cried Esther. "It's evil!"

"It ain't either!" shrilled Abie, astonishingly. "It ain't either!"

"We shouldn't." Miriam's trembling hands brushed her heavy hair upward. "It's forbidden."

"Sit down," I said gently. "The day I arrived at Bendo, Mr. Diemus told me to teach you what I had to teach you. I have to teach you that Remembering The Home is good."

"Then why don't the grownups think so?" Matt asked slowly. "They tell us not to talk about it. We shouldn't disobey our parents."

"I know," I admitted, "And I would never ask you children to go against your parents' wishes — unless I felt that it is very important. If you'd rather they didn't know about it at first, keep it as our secret. Mr. Diemus told me not to bother them with explanations or reasons. I'll make it right with your parents when the time comes." I paused to swallow and to blink away a vision of me, leaving town in a

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cloud of dust barely ahead of a posse of irate parents. "Now, everyone busy," I said briskly. "I Remember The Home."

There was a moment heavy with decision and I held my breath, wondering which way the balance would dip. And then — surely it must have been because they wanted so to speak and to affirm the wonder of what had been that they capitulated so easily. Heads bent and pencils scurried. And Martha sat, her head bowed on her desk with sorrow.

"I don't know enough words," she mourned. "How do you write *toolas?*"

And Abie laboriously erased a hole through his paper and licked his pencil again.

"Why don't you and Abie make some pictures?" I suggested. "Make a little story with pictures and we can staple them together like a real book."

I looked over the silent, busy group and let myself relax, feeling weakness flood into my knees. I scrubbed the dampness from my palms with Kleenex and sat back in my chair. Slowly I became conscious of a new atmosphere in my classroom. An intolerable strain was gone, an unconscious holding back of the children, a wariness, a watchfulness, a guilty feeling of desiring what was forbidden.

A prayer of thanksgiving began to well up inside me. It changed hastily to a plea for mercy as I began to visualize what might happen to me when the parents found out what I was doing. How long must this containment and denial have gone on? This concealment and this carefully nourished fear? From what Karen had told me, it must be well over fifty years — long enough to mark indelibly three generations.

And here I was with my fine little hatchet trying to set a little world afire! On which very mixed metaphor, I stiffened my weak knees and got up from my chair. I walked unnoticed up and down the aisles, stepping aside as Joel went blindly to the shelf for more paper, leaning over Miriam to marvel that she had taken out her crayolas and part of her writing was with colors, part with pencil — and the colors spoke to something in me that the pencil couldn't reach though I'd never seen the forms the colors took.

The children had gone home, happy and excited, chattering and laughing, until they reached the edge of the school grounds. There smiles died and laughter stopped and faces and feet grew heavy again. All but Esther's. Hers had never been light. I sighed and turned to the papers. Here was Abie's little book. I thumbed through it and drew a deep breath and went back through it slowly again.

A second grader drawing this? Six pages — six finished, adult-looking pages. Crayolas achieving effects I'd never seen before — pictures that told a story loudly and clearly.

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Stars blazing in a black sky, with the slender needle of a ship, like a mote in the darkness.

The vasty green cloud-shrouded arc of earth against the blackness. A pink tinge of beginning friction along the ship's belly. I put my finger to the glow. Almost I could feel the heat.

Inside the ship, suffering and pain, heroic striving, crumpled bodies and seared faces. A baby dead in its mother's arms. Then a swarm of tinier needles erupting from the womb of the ship. And the last shriek of incandescence as the ship volatilized against the thickening drag of the air.

I leaned my head on my hands and closed my eyes. All this, all *this* in the memory of an eight-year-old? All *this* in the feelings of an eight-year-old? Because Abie knew — he *knew* how this felt. He knew the heat and strivings and the dying and fleeing. No wonder Abie whispered and leaned. Racial memory was truly a two-sided coin.

I felt a pang of misgivings. Maybe I was wrong to let him remember so vividly. Maybe I shouldn't have let him . . .

I turned to Martha's papers. They were delicate, almost spidery drawings of some fuzzy little animal (*toolas?*) that apparently built a hanging, hammocky nest and gathered fruit in a huge leaf-basket and had a bird for a friend. A truly out-of-this-world bird. Much of her story escaped me because first graders — if anyone at all — produce symbolic art, and, since her frame of reference and mine were so different, there was much that I couldn't interpret. But her whole booklet was joyous and light.

And now, the stories —

I lifted my head and blinked into the twilight. I had finished all the papers except Esther's. It was her cramped writing, swimming in darkness, that made me realize that the day was gone and that I was shivering in a shadowy room with the fire in the old-fashioned heater gone out.

Slowly I shuffled the papers into my desk drawer, hesitated, and took out Esther's. I would finish at home. I shrugged into my coat and wandered home, my thoughts intent on the papers I had read. And suddenly I wanted to cry — to cry for the wonders that had been and were no more. For the heritage of attainment and achievement these children had, but couldn't use. For the dream-come-true of what they were capable of doing, but weren't permitted to do. For the homesick yearning that filled every line they had written — these unhappy exiles, three generations removed from any physical knowledge of The Home.

I stopped on the bridge and leaned against the railing in the half dark. Suddenly *I* felt a welling homesickness. *That* was what the world should be like — what it *could* be like if only — if only . . .

But my tears for The Home were

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as hidden as the emotions of Mrs. Diemus when she looked up uncuriously as I came through the kitchen door.

"Good evening," she said. "I've kept your supper warm."

"Thank you." I shivered convulsively. "It *is* getting cold."

I sat on the edge of my bed that night, letting the memory of the kids' papers wash over me, trying to fill in around the bits and snippets that they had told of The Home. And then I began to wonder. All of them who wrote about the actual Home had been so happy with their memories. From Timmy and his *Shinny ship as high as a montin and faster than two jets*, and Dorcas's wandering tenses as though yesterday and today were one, *The flowers were like lights. At night it isn't dark becas they shine so bright and when the moon came up the breeos sing and the music was so you can see it like rain falling around only happyer*,' up to Miriam's wistful *On Gathering Day there was a big party. Everybody came dressed in beautiful clothes with* Flahmen *in the girl's hair.* Flahmen *are flowers but they're good to eat. And if a girl felt her heart sing for a boy, they ate a* Flahmen *together and started two-ing.*

Then, if all these memories were so happy, why the rigid suppression of them by grownups? Why the pall of unhappiness over everyone? You can't mourn forever for a wrecked ship. Why a hidey-hole for disobedient children? Why the misery and frustration when, if they could do half of what I didn't fully understand from Joel and Matt's highly technical papers, they could make Bendo an Eden —

I reached for Esther's paper. I had put it on the bottom on purpose. I dreaded reading it. She had sat with her head buried on her arms on her desk most of the time the others were writing busily. At widely separated intervals she scribbled a line or two as though she were doing something shameful. She, of all the children, had seemed to find no relief in her remembering.

I smoothed the paper on my lap.

I remember, she had written. "*We were thursty. There was water in the creek we were hiding in the grass. We could not drink. They would shoot us. Three days the sun was hot. She screamed for water and ran to the creek. They shot. The water got red.*

Blistered spots marked the tears on the paper.

They found a baby under a bush. The man hit it with the wood part of his gun. He hit it and hit it and hit it. I hit scorpins like that.

They caught us and put us in a pen. They built a fire all around us. Fly "they said" fly and save yourselfs. We flew because it hurt. They shot us.

Monster "they yelled" evil monsters. People can't fly. People can't move things. People are the same. You aren't people. Die die die.

Then blackly, traced and retraced until the paper split:

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If anyone finds out we are not of earth we will die.

Keep your feet on the ground.

Bleakly I laid the paper aside. So there was the answer, putting Karen's bits and snippets together with these. The shipwrecked ones finding savages on the desert island. A remnant surviving by learning caution, suppression and denial. Another generation that pinned the *evil* label on The Home to insure continued immunity for their children, and now, a generation that questioned and wondered — and rebelled.

I turned off the light and slowly got into bed. I lay there staring into the darkness, holding the picture Esther had evoked. Finally I relaxed. "God help her," I sighed. "God help us all."

Another week was nearly over. We cleaned the room up quickly, for once anticipating the fun time instead of dreading it. I smiled to hear the happy racket all around me, and felt my own spirits surge upward in response to the lightheartedness of the children. The difference that one afternoon had made in them! Now they were beginning to feel like children to me. They were beginning to accept me. I swallowed with an effort. How soon would they ask *how come?* How come I knew? There they sat, all nine of them — nine, because Esther was my first absence in the year — bright-eyed and expectant.

"Can we write again?" asked Sarah, "I can remember lots more."

"No," I said. "Not today." Smiles died and there was a protesting wiggle through the room. "Today, we are going to *do*. Joel." I looked at him and tightened my jaws. "Joel, give me the dictionary." He began to get up. ". . . *without leaving your seat!*"

"But I —!" Joel broke the shocked silence. "I can't!"

"Yes you can," I prayed. "Yes you can. Give me the dictionary. Here, on my desk."

Joel turned and stared at the big old dictionary that spilled pages 1965 to 1998 out of its cracked old binding. Then he said, "Miriam?" in a high, tight voice. But she shook her head and shrank back in her seat, her eyes big and dark in her white face.

"You can." Miriam's voice was hardly more than a breath. "It's just bigger —"

Joel clutched the edge of his desk and sweat started out on his forehead. There was a stir of movement on the bookshelf. Then, as though shot from a gun, pages 1965 to 1998 whisked to my desk and fell fluttering. Our laughter cut through the blank amazement and we laughed till tears came.

"That's a-doing it, Joel!" shouted Matt. "That's showing them your muscles!"

"Well, it's a beginning," grinned Joel weakly. "You do it, brother, if you think it's so easy."

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So Matt sweated and strained and Joel joined with him, but they only managed to scrape the book to the edge of the shelf where it teetered dangerously.

Then Abie waved his hand timidly. "I can, teacher," he said.

I beamed that my silent one had spoken and at the same time frowned at the loving laughter of the big kids.

"Okay, Abie," I encouraged. "You show them how to do it."

And the dictionary swung off the shelf and glided unhastily to my desk, where it came silently to rest.

Everyone stared at Abie and he squirmed. "The little ships," he defended. "That's the way they moved them out of the big ship. Just like that."

Joel and Matt turned their eyes to some inner concentration and then exchanged exasperated looks.

"Why, sure," said Matt. "Why sure." And the dictionary swung back to the shelf.

"Hey!" protested Timmy. "It's my turn!"

"That poor dictionary," I said. "It's too old for all this bouncing around. Just put the loose pages back on the shelf."

And he did.

Everyone sighed and looked at me expectantly.

"Miriam?" She clasped her hands convulsively. "*You* come to me," I said, feeling a chill creep across my stiff shoulders. "*Lift* to me, Miriam."

Without taking her eyes from me, she slipped out of her seat and stood in the aisle. Her skirts swayed a little as her feet lifted from the floor. Slowly at first and then more quickly she came to me, soundlessly, through the air, until in a little flurried rush, her arms went around me and she gasped into my shoulder. I put her aside, trembling. I groped for my handkerchief. I said shakily, "Miriam, help the rest. I'll be back in a minute."

And I stumbled into the room next door. Huddled down in the dust and debris of the catch-all store room it had become, I screamed soundlessly into my muffling hands. And screamed and screamed! Because after all — *after all!*

And then suddenly, with a surge of pure panic, I heard a sound — the sound of footsteps, many footsteps, approaching the school house. I jumped for the door and wrenched it open just in time to see the outside door open. There was Mr. Diemus and Esther and Esther's father, Mr. Jonso.

In one of those flashes of clarity that engrave your mind in a split second, I saw my whole classroom.

Joel and Matt were chinning themselves on non-existent bars, their heads brushing the high ceiling as they grunted upwards. Abie was swinging in a swing that wasn't there, arcing across the corner of the room, just missing the stove pipe from the old stove, as he chanted, "Up in a swing, up in a swing!"

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This wasn't the first time *they* had tried their wings! Miriam was kneeling in a circle with the other girls and the were all coaxing their books up to hover unsupported above the floor, while Timmy *v-roomm-vroomed* two paper jet planes through intricate maneuvers in and out the rows of desks.

My soul curdled in me as I met Mr. Diemus' eyes. Esther gave a choked cry as she saw what the children were doing, and the girls' stricken faces turned to the intruders. Matt and Joel crumpled to the floor and scrambled to their feet. But Abie, absorbed by his wonderful new accomplishment, swung on, all unconscious of what was happening until Talitha frantically screamed "Abie!"

Startled, he jerked around and saw the forbidding group at the door. With a disappointed cry, as though a loved toy had been snatched from him, he stopped there in mid-air, his fists clenched. And then, realizing, he screamed, a terrified, panic-stricken cry, and slanted sharply upward, trying to escape, and ran full tilt into the corner of the high old map case, sideswipping it with his head, and, reeling backwards, fell!

I tried to catch him. I did! I did! But I only caught one small hand as he plunged down onto the old wood-burning heater beneath him. And the crack of his skull against the ornate edge of the cast-iron lid was loud in the silence.

I straightened the crumpled little body carefully, not daring to touch the quiet little head. Mr. Diemus and I looked at one another as we knelt on opposite sides of the child. His lips opened, but I plunged before he could get started.

"If he dies," I bit my words off viciously, "you killed him!"

His mouth opened again, mainly from astonishment. "I —" he began.

"Barging in on my classroom!" I raged. "Interrupting class work! Frightening my children! It's all your fault, your fault!" I couldn't bear the burden of guilt alone. I just had to have someone share it with me. But the fire died and I smoothed Abie's hand, trembling. "Please call a doctor. He might be dying."

"Nearest one is in Tortura Pass," said Mr. Diemus. "Sixty miles by road."

"Cross country?" I asked.

"Two mountain ranges and an alkali plateau."

"Then — then —" Abie's hand was so still in mine.

"There's a doctor at the Tumble A ranch," said Joel faintly. "He's taking a vacation."

"Go get him." I held Joel with my eyes. "*Go as fast as you know how!*"

Joel gulped miserably. "Okay."

"They'll probably have horses to come back on," I said. "Don't be too obvious."

"Okay," and he ran out the door. We heard the thud of his running feet until he was halfway across the

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school yard, then silence. Faintly, seconds later, creek gravel crunched below the hill. I could only guess at what he was doing — that he couldn't lift all the way and was going in jumps whose length was beyond all reasonable measuring.

The children had gone home, quietly, anxiously. And, after the doctor arrived, we had improvised a stretcher and carried Abie to the Peters home. I walked along close beside him watching his pinched little face, my hand touching his chest occasionally just to be sure he was still breathing.

And now — the waiting . . .

I looked at my watch again. A minute past the last time I looked. Sixty seconds by the hands, but hours and hours by anxiety. I

"He'll be all right," I whispered, mostly to comfort myself. "The doctor will know what to do."

Mr. Diemus turned his dark empty eyes to me. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "We almost had it stamped out. We were almost free."

"Free of what?" I took a deep breath. "Why did *you* do it? Why did you deny your children their inheritance?"

"It isn't your concern —"

"Anything that hampers my children is my concern. Anything that turns children into creeping, frightened mice is wrong. Maybe I went at the whole deal the wrong way, but you told me to teach them what I had to — and I did."

"Disobedience, rebellion, flouting authority —"

"They obeyed *me*," I retorted. "They accepted *my* authority!" Then I softened. "I can't blame them," I confessed. "They were troubled. They told me it was wrong — that they had been *taught* it was wrong. I argued them into it. But oh, Mr. Diemus! It took so little argument, such a tiny breach in the dam to loose the flood. They never even questioned my knowledge — any more than you have, Mr. Diemus! All this — this *wonder* was beating against their minds, fighting to be set free. The rebellion was there long before I came. I didn't incite them to something new. I'll bet there's not a one, except maybe Esther, who hasn't practiced and practiced, furtively and ashamed, the things I permitted — demanded that they do for me.

"It wasn't fair — not fair at all — to hold them back."

"You don't understand." Mr. Diemus' face was stony. "You haven't all the facts —"

"I have enough," I replied. "So you have a frightened memory of an unfortunate period in your history. But what people *doesn't* have such a memory in larger or lesser degree? That you and your children have it more vividly should have helped, not hindered. You should have been able to figure out ways of adjusting. But leave that for the moment. Take the other side of the picture. What possible thing could all this

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suppression and denial yield you more precious than what you gave up?"

"It's the only way," said Mr. Diemus. "We are unacceptable to earth, but we have to stay. We have to conform —"

"Of course you had to conform," I cried. "Anyone has to when they change societies. At least enough to get them by until others can adjust to them. But to crawl in a hole and pull it in after you! Why, the other Group —"

"Other Group!" Mr. Diemus whitened, his eyes widening. "Other Group? There are others? There are others?" He leaned tensely forward in his chair. "Where? Where?" And his voice broke shrilly on the last word. He closed his eyes and his mouth trembled as he fought for control. The bedroom door opened. Dr. Curtis came out, his shoulders weary.

He looked from Mr. Diemus to me and back. "He should be in a hospital. There's a depressed fracture and I don't know what all else. Probably extensive brain involvement. We need X-rays and — and —" He rubbed his hand slowly over his weary young face. "Frankly, I'm not experienced to handle cases like this. We need specialists. If you can scare up some kind of transportation that won't jostle . . ." He shook his head, seeing the kind of country that lay between us and anyplace, and went back into the bedroom.

"He's dying," said Mr. Diemus. "Whether you're right or we're right, he's dying."

"Wait! Wait!" I said, catching at the tag end of a sudden idea. "Let me think." Urgently I willed myself back through the years to the old Dorm room. Intently I listened and listened and remembered.

"Have you a — a — *Sorter* in this Group?" I asked, fumbling for unfamiliar terms.

"No," said Mr. Diemus. "One who could have been, but isn't."

"Or *any* communicator?" I asked. "Anyone who can send or receive?"

"No," said Mr. Diemus, sweat starting on his forehead. "One who could have been, but —"

"See?" I accused. "See what you've traded for . . . for what? Who are the coulds but can'ts? Who are they?"

"I am," said Mr. Diemus, the words a bitterness in his mouth. "And my wife."

I stared at him, wondering confusedly. How far did training decide? What could we do with what we had?

"Look," I said quickly. "There *is* another Group. And they — they have all the Signs and Persuasions. Karen's been trying to find you — to find any of the People. She told me — oh, Lord, it's been years ago, I hope it's still so — every evening they send out calls for the People. If we can catch it — if *you* can catch the call and answer it, they can help. I know they can. Faster than cars,

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faster than planes, more surely than specialists —"

"But if the doctor finds out —" wavered Mr. Diemus fearfully.

I stood up abruptly. "Good night, Mr. Diemus," I said, turning to the door. "Let me know when Abie dies."

His cold hand shook on my arm.

"Can't you see!" he cried. "I've been taught too, longer and stronger than the children! We never even dared *think* of rebellion! Help me, help me!"

"Get your wife," I said. "Get her and Abie's mother and father. Bring them down to the grove. We can't do anything here in the house. It's too heavy with denial."

I hurried on ahead and sank down on my knees in the evening shadows among the trees.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I cried into the bend of my arm. "I have an idea, but I don't know! Help us! Guide us!"

I opened my eyes to the arrival of the four.

"We told him we were going out to pray," said Mr. Diemus

And we all did.

Then Mr. Diemus began the call I worded for him, silently, but with such intensity that sweat started again on his face. *Karen, Karen, Come to the People, Come to the People.* And the other three sat around him, bolstering his effort, supporting his cry. I watched their tense faces, my own twisting in sympathy, and time was lost as we labored.

Then slowly his breathing calmed and his face relaxed and I felt a stirring as though something brushed past my mind. Mrs. Diemus whispered, "He remembers now. He's found the way."

And as the last spark of sun caught mica highlights on the hilltop above us, Mr. Diemus stretched his hands out slowly and said with infinite relief, "There they are."

I looked around startled, half expecting to see Karen coming through the trees. But Mr. Diemus spoke again.

"Karen, we need help. One of our Group is dying. We have a doctor, an Outsider, but he hasn't the equipment or the know-how to help. What shall we do?"

In the pause that followed, I was slowly conscious of a new feeling. I couldn't tell you exactly what it was — a kind of unfolding . . . an opening . . . a relaxation. The ugly tight defensiveness that was so characteristic of the grownups of Bendo was slipping away.

"Yes, Valancy," said Mr. Diemus. "He's in a bad way. We can't help because —" His voice faltered and his words died. I felt a resurgence of fear and unhappiness as his communication went beyond words, and then ebbed back to speech again.

"We'll expect you then. You know the way."

I could see the pale blur of his face in the dusk under the trees as he turned back to us.

"They're coming," he said, won-

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deringly. "Karen and Valancy. They're so pleased to find us—" His voice broke. "We're *not* alone—"

And I turned away as the two couples merged in the darkness. I had pushed them somewhere way beyond me.

It was a lonely, lonely walk back to the house for me . . . alone.

They dropped down through the half darkness — four of them. For a fleeting second I wondered at myself that I could stand there matter-of-factly watching four adults slant calmly down out of the sky. Not a hair ruffled, not a stain of travel on them, knowing that only a short time before they had been hundreds of miles away — not even aware that Bendo existed.

But all strangeness was swept away as Karen hugged me delightedly.

"It *is* you!" she cried. "He said it was, but I wasn't sure! Oh, it's so *good* to see you again! Who owes who a letter?"

She laughed and turned to the smiling three. "Valancy, the Old One of our Group." Valancy's radiant face proved the Old One didn't mean age. "Bethie, our Sensitive." The slender, fair-haired young girl ducked her head shyly. "And my brother Jemmy. Valancy's his wife."

"This is Mr. and Mrs. Diemus," I said. "And Mr. and Mrs. Peters, Abie's parents. It's Abie, you know. My second grade." I was suddenly overwhelmed by how long ago and far away school felt. How far I'd gone from my accustomed pattern!

"What shall we do about the doctor?" I asked. "Will he have to know?"

"Yes," said Valancy. "We can help him, but we can't do the actual work. Can we trust him?"

I hesitated, remembering the few scanty glimpses I'd had of him. "I —" I began.

"Pardon me," said Karen. "I wanted to save time. I went in to you. We know now what you know of him. We'll trust Dr. Curtis."

I felt an eerie creeping up my spine. To have my thoughts taken so casually! Even to the doctor's name!

Bethie stirred restlessly and looked at Valancy. "He'll be in convulsions soon. We'd better hurry."

"You're sure you have the knowledge?" asked Valancy.

"Yes," murmured Bethie. "If I can make the doctor see — if he's willing to follow."

"Follow what?"

The heavy tones of the doctor's voice startled us all as he stepped out on the porch.

I stood aghast at the impossibility of the task ahead of us and looked at Karen and Valancy to see how they would make the doctor understand. They said nothing. They just looked at him. There was a breathless pause. The doctor's startled face caught the glint of light from the open door as he turned to Valancy. He rubbed his hand across his face in bewilderment and, after a moment, turned to me.

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"Do *you* hear her?"

"No," I admitted. "She isn't talking to me."

"Do you *know* these people?"

"Oh yes!" I cried, wishing passionately it was true. "Oh, yes!"

"And believe them?"

"Implicitly," I said.

"But she says that Bethie — who's Bethie?" He glanced around.

"She is," said Karen, nodding at Bethie.

"*She* is?" Dr. Curtis looked intently at the shy, lovely face. He shook his head wonderingly and turned back to me.

"Anyway, this one, Valancy, says Bethie can sense every condition in the child's body and that she will be able to tell all the injuries, their location and extent without X-rays! Without equipment!"

"Yes," I said. "If they say so."

"You would be willing to risk a child's life —"

"Yes," I said. "They know. They really do." And swallowed hard to keep down the fist of doubt that clenched in my chest.

"You believe they can *see* through flesh and bone?"

"Maybe not see," I said, wondering at my own words. "But *know* with a knowledge that is sure and complete." I glanced, startled, at Karen. Her nod was very small but it told me where my words came from.

"Are *you* willing to trust these people?" The doctor turned to Abie's parents.

"They're *our* People," said Mr. Peters with quiet pride. "I'd operate on him myself with a pickax if they said so."

"Of all the screwball deals . . .!" The doctor's hand rubbed across his face again. "I know I needed this vacation, but this is ridiculous!"

We all listened to the silence of the night and — at least I — to the drumming of anxious pulses until Dr. Curtis sighed heavily.

"Okay, Valancy. I don't believe a word of it. At least I wouldn't if I were in my right mind, but you've got the terminology down pat as if you knew *something*. . . . Well, I'll do it. It's either that or let him die. And God have mercy on our souls!"

I couldn't bear the thought of shutting myself in with my own dark fears, so I walked back towards the school, hugging myself in my inadequate coat against the sudden sharp chill of the night. I wandered down to the grove, praying wordlessly, and on up to the school. But I couldn't go in. I shuddered away from the blank glint of the windows and turned back to the grove. There wasn't any more time or direction or light or anything familiar — only a confused cloud of anxiety and a final icy weariness that drove me back to Abie's house.

I stumbled into the kitchen, my stiff hands fumbling at the door knob. I huddled in a chair, gratefully leaning over the hot wood stove that flicked the semi-darkness

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of the big homey room with warm red light, trying to coax some feeling back into my fingers.

I drowsed as the warmth began to penetrate and then the door was flung open and slammed shut. The doctor leaned back against it, his hand still clutching the knob.

"Do you know what they did?" he cried, not so much to me as to himself. "What they made *me* do? Oh Lord!" He staggered over to the stove, stumbling over my feet. He collapsed by my chair, rocking his head between his hands. "They made me operate on his brain! *Repair* it. Trace circuits and rebuild them. *You can't do that!* It can't be done! Brain cells damaged can't be repaired. No one can restore circuits that are destroyed! It can't be done. But I did it! *I did it!*"

I knelt beside him and tried to comfort him in the circle of my arms.

"There, there, there," I soothed.

He clung like a terrified child. "No anesthetics!" he cried. "*She* kept him asleep. And no bleeding when I went through the scalp! *They* stopped it. And the impossible things I did with the few instruments I have with me! And the brain starting to mend right before my eyes! Nothing was right!"

"But nothing was wrong," I murmured. "Abie will be all right, won't he?"

"How do I know?" he shouted suddenly, pushing away from me. "I don't know anything about a thing like this. I put his brain back together and he's still breathing, but how do I know!"

"There, there," I soothed. "It's over now."

"It'll never be over!" With an effort he calmed himself and we helped one another up from the floor. "You can't forget a thing like this in a life time."

"We can give you forgetting," said Valancy softly from the door. "If you *want* to forget. We can send you back to the Tumble A with no memory of tonight except a pleasant visit to Bendo."

"You can?" He turned speculative eyes toward her. "You can." He amended his words to a statement.

"Do you want to forget?" asked Valancy.

"Of course not," he snapped. Then, "I'm sorry. It's just that I don't often work miracles in the wilderness. But if I did it once, maybe —"

"Then you understand what you did?" asked Valancy, smiling.

"Well, no, but if I could — if you would . . . There must be some way —"

"Yes," said Valancy, "But you'd have to have a Sensitive working with you and Bethie is It as far as Sensitives go right now."

"You mean it's true what I saw — what you told me about the — The Home? You're extraterrestrials?"

"Yes," sighed Valancy. "At least our grandparents were." Then she

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smiled. "But we're learning where we can fit into this world. Some day — some day we'll be able —" She changed the subject abruptly.

"You realize, of course, Dr. Curtis, that we'd rather you wouldn't discuss Bendo or us with anyone else. We would rather be just people to Outsiders."

He laughed shortly, "Would I be believed if I did?"

"Maybe no, maybe so," said Valancy. "Maybe only enough to start people nosing around. And that would be too much. We have a bad situation here and it will take a long time to erase —" and her voice slipped into silence and I knew she had dropped into thoughts to brief him on the local problem. How long is a thought? How fast can you think of Hell — and Heaven? It was that long before the doctor blinked and drew a shaky breath.

"Yes," he said. "A long time."

"If you like," said Valancy, "I can block your ability to talk of us."

"Nothing doing!" snapped the doctor. "I can manage my own censorship, thanks."

Valancy flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be condescending."

"You weren't," said the doctor. "I'm just on the prod tonight. It has been *A Day*, and that's for sure!"

"Hasn't it though?" I smiled, and then, astonished, rubbed my cheeks because tears had begun to spill down my face. I laughed, embarrassed, and couldn't stop. My laughter turned suddenly to sobs and I was bitterly ashamed to hear myself wailing like a child. I clung to Valancy's strong hands until I suddenly slid into a warm welcome darkness that had no thinking or fearing or need for believing in anything outrageous, but only in sleep.

It was a magic year and it fled on impossibly fast wings, the holidays flicking past like telephone poles by a railroad. Christmas was especially magic because my angels actually flew and the Glory actually shone round about because their robes had hems woven of sunlight — I watched the girls weave them. And Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, complete with cardboard antlers that wouldn't stay straight, really took off and circled the room. And, as our Mary and Joseph leaned raptly over the Manger, their faces solemn and intent on the Miracle, I felt suddenly that they were really seeing, really kneeling beside the Manger in Bethlehem.

Anyway, the months fled, and the blossoming of Bendo was beautiful to see. There was laughter and frolicking and even the houses grew subtly into color. Green things crept out where only rocks had been before and a tiny tentative stream of water had begun to flow down the creek again. They explained to me that they had to take it slow because people might wonder if the creek filled overnight! Even the rough steps up to the houses were being overgrown because they were so

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seldom used, and I was becoming accustomed to seeing my pupils coming to school like a bevy of bright birds, playing tag in the treetops. I was surprised at myself for adjusting so easily to all the incredible things done around me by The People, and I was pleased that they accepted me so completely. But I always felt a pang when the children escorted me home — with me, they had to walk.

But all things have to end, and I sat one May afternoon, staring into my top desk drawer, the last to be cleaned out, wondering what to do with the accumulation of useless things in it. But I wasn't really seeing the contents of the drawer, I was concentrating on the great weary emptiness that pressed my shoulders down and weighted my mind. "It's not fair," I muttered aloud and illogically, "to show me Heaven and then snatch it away."

"That's about what happened to Moses, too, you know."

My surprised start spilled an assortment of paper clips and thumb tacks from the battered box I had just picked up.

"Well forevermore!" I said, righting the box. "Dr. Curtis! What are you doing here?"

"Returning to the scene of my crime," he smiled, coming through the open door. "Can't keep my mind off Abie. Can't believe he recovered from all that . . . shall we call it repair work? I have to check him every time I'm anywhere near this part of the country — and I still can't believe it."

"But he has."

"He has for sure! I had to fish him down from a treetop to look him over —" The doctor shuddered dramatically and laughed. "To see him hurtling down from the top of that tree curdled my blood! But there's hardly even a visible scar left."

"I know," I said, jabbing my finger as I started to gather up the tacks. "I looked last night. I'm leaving tomorrow, you know." I kept my eyes resolutely down to the job at hand. "I have this last straightening up to do."

"It's hard, isn't it?" he said and we both knew he wasn't talking about straightening up.

"Yes," I said soberly. "Awfully hard. Earth gets heavier every day."

"I find it so lately, too," he said. "But at least you have the satisfaction of knowing that you —"

I moved uncomfortably and laughed.

"Well, they do say: Those as can, do; those as can't, teach."

"Umm," said the doctor noncommittally, but I could feel his eyes on my averted face and I swiveled away from him, groping for a better box to put the clips in.

"Going to summer school?" His voice came from near the windows.

"No," I sniffed cautiously. "No, I swore when I got my Master's that I was through with education — at least the kind that's come-every-day-and-learn-something."

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"Hmm!" There was amusement in the doctor's voice. "Too bad," he said. "I'm going to school this summer. Thought you might like to go there, too."

"Where?" I asked bewildered, finally looking at him.

"Cougar Canyon Summer School," he smiled. "Most exclusive."

"Cougar Canyon! Why that's where Karen —"

"Exactly," he said. "That's where the other Group is established. I just came from there. Karen and Valancy want us both to come. Do you object to being an experiment?"

"Why, no —" I cried — and then, cautiously, "What kind of an experiment?" Visions of brains being carved up swam through my mind.

The doctor laughed. "Nothing as gruesome as you're imagining, probably." Then he sobered and sat on the edge of my desk. "I've been to Cougar Canyon a couple of times, trying to figure out some way to get Bethie to help me when I come up against a case that's a puzzler. Valancy and Karen want to try a period of training with Outsiders —" he grimaced wryly "— that's us — to see how much of what *they* are can be transmitted by training. You know Bethie is half Outsider. Only her mother was of The People."

He was watching me intently.

"Yes," I said absently, my mind whirling, "Karen told me."

"Well, do you want to try it? Do you want to go?"

"Do I want to go!" I cried, scrambling the clips into a rubber band box. "How soon do we leave? Half an hour? Ten minutes? Did you leave the motor running?"

"Woops, woops!" The doctor took me by both arms and looked soberly into my eyes.

"We can't set our hopes too high," he said quietly. "It may be that for such knowledge we aren't teachable —"

I looked soberly back at him, my heart crying in fear that it might be so.

"Look," I said slowly. "If you had a hunger, a great big gnawing-inside hunger and no money and you saw a bakery shop window — which would you do? Turn your back on it? Or would you press your nose as close as you could against the glass and let at least your eyes feast? I know what *I'd* do." I reached for my sweater.

"And, you know, you never can tell. The shop door might open a crack, maybe — someday . . ."

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Too Far

by FREDRIC BROWN

R. AUSTIN WILKINSON WAS A BON vivant, man about Manhattan, and chaser of women. He was also an incorrigible punster on every possible occasion. In speaking of his favorite activity, for example, he would remark that he was a wolf, as it were, but that didn't make him a werewolf.

Excruciating as this statement may have been to some of his friends, it was almost true. Wilkinson was not a werewolf; he was a werebuck.

A night or two nights every week he would stroll into Central Park, turn himself into a buck and take great delight in running and playing.

True, there was always danger of his being seen but (since he punned even in his thoughts) he was willing to gambol on that.

Oddly, it had never occurred to him to combine the pleasures of being a wolf, as it were, with the pleasures of being a buck.

Until one night. Why, he asked himself that night, couldn't a lucky buck make a little doe? Once thought of, the idea was irresistible. He galloped to the wall of the Central Park Zoo and trotted along it until his sensitive buck nose told him he'd found the right place to climb the fence. He changed into a man for the task of climbing and then, alone in a pen with a beautiful doe, he changed himself back into a buck.

She was sleeping. He nudged her gently and whispered a suggestion. Her eyes opened wide and startled. "No, no, a dozen times no!"

"Only a doezen times?" he asked, and then leered. "*My deer*," he whispered, "*think of the fawn you'll have!*"

Which went too far. He might have got away with it had his deer really been only a doe, but she was a weremaid — a doe who could change into a girl — and she was a witch as well. She quickly changed into a girl and ran for the fence. When he changed into a man and started after her she threw a spell over her shoulder, a spell that turned him back to a buck and froze him that way.

Do you ever visit the Central Park Zoo? Look for the buck with the sad eyes; he's Wilkinson.

He is sad despite the fact that the doe-weremaid, who is now the toast of New York ballet (she is graceful as a deer, the critics say) visits him occasionally by night and, resumes her proper form.

But when he begs for release from the spell she only smiles sweetly and tells him no, that she is of a very saving disposition and wants to keep the first buck she ever made.

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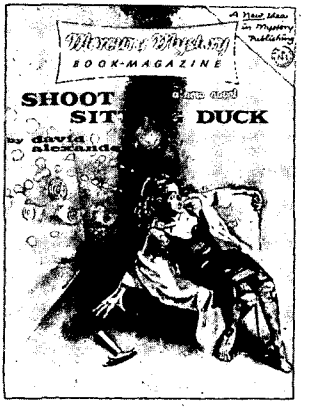

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